Sleepless
Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/16701139.

Rating:	Mature
Archive Warning:	Graphic Depictions Of Violence, Rape/Non-Con
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Harry Potter - J. K. Rowling
Relationship:	Sirius Black/Severus Snape, Albus Dumbledore & Severus Snape, Severus Snape & Molly Weasley, Sirius Black & Remus Lupin, Remus Lupin/Nymphadora Tonks, Severus Snape & Voldemort, Sirius Black/James Potter, Lily Evans Potter/Severus Snape, Sirius Black & Harry Potter
Character:	Sirius Black, Severus Snape, Albus Dumbledore, Tom Riddle | Voldemort, Remus Lupin, Harry Potter, Lily Evans, Hermione Granger, Molly Weasley, Nymphadora Tonks, George Weasley, Fred Weasley, Alastor "Mad-Eye" Moody, James Potter, Lily Evans Potter, Tobias Snape, Eileen Prince, Ron Weasley
Additional Tags:	Romance, Past Child Abuse, Hurt/Comfort, Angst, Rape/Non-con Elements, Past Rape/Non-con, Mental Health Issues, Torture, Slow Burn, Implied/Referenced Suicide, Panic Attacks, Depression, Horror, Emotional/Psychological Abuse, Enemies to Friends to Lovers, Smut, Fluff, Implied/Referenced Drug Use, Unrequited Love, Dissociative Identity Disorder
Stats:	Published: 2018-11-22 Completed: 2020-09-09 Chapters: 42/42 Words: 122399

Sleepless

by TowardTheStars

Summary

Severus Snape can't sleep. Neither can Sirius Black.

When Dumbledore orders them to share a bed for two weeks, revelations come to light.

Slip

“Severus, both you and I know that you have difficulties sleeping,” Dumbledore stated. The man across from him shot him an irritated look.

“And you won’t let me take care of it myself anymore? I know what I’m doing, Albus. Let me be.”

“Normally, I would. However, with Voldemort’s return and the added stress, I want to ensure that you at least are sleeping well enough that you can handle whatever he throws at you.”

Snape’s face froze slightly at the mention of Voldemort. “I can handle it,” he muttered, his eyes flickering from Dumbledore’s gaze.

“I’m certain you can, but I would still like you to try this. Help out an old man who wants to help you.”

Something twisted in Snape’s eyes, and Dumbledore witnessed the fight leave Snape’s body. The quick submission alarmed Dumbledore. He had never met anyone more stubborn than a well-rested Snape. Reaffirmed in his decision, Dumbledore took a sip of tea.

“There is someone else who has struggled with nightmares and insomnia. I believe that letting you both sleep in the same bed would alleviate some of the affects and help both of you garner a few more hours of rest. If you are unhappy with the arrangement after two weeks, then you may stop. Until then, every night should be spent together.”

“Fine,” Severus hissed after a minute of contemplation, “I’ll give you your two weeks. But don’t expect anything more.”

“That’s all I’m asking, my dear boy.”

“Who is it?” Snape’s voice curled over the room, and Dumbledore felt his heart sink.

“Severus, before you get defensive, understand that the other person has already agreed to this. And I warned him that if he wrongs you in any way, I will ensure that the punishment is swift.”

“Who is it?” Snape repeated, his voice hardening. Dumbledore ran a hand through his beard.

“None other than Sirius Black, my dear boy.”

At times like these, Dumbledore was always impressed by how well Snape maintained control of

his emotions. The only movement that signified his anger of shock was the slight pressing of his lips while his eyes remained stony and unreadable.

“No,” Snape put out bluntly. He moved to stand up. “This conversation is over.”

“Sit down,” Dumbledore ordered in his no-nonsense voice. Snape sat down. “I understand your hesitation, but understand this, this is something I need you to do. I will not allow Voldemort to take advantage of you because your mind is too sluggish after only an hour of sleep. I will not allow it.”

“So give me some sleeping potions, if you so worried,” Snape snarled. Dumbledore shook his head.

“And find you in a few months addicted and dependent? No. You agreed to the two weeks, and so it will happen. You don’t have to talk to him, you don’t even have to look at him, but I want both of you sleeping in the same bed. Consider me a fool if you’d like.”

“So you’re going to force me to do this then?” A darkness had overcome Snape’s face. “No wonder I don’t get any sleep, with two masters,” his tongue curling viciously around the word, “ordering me around.” Snape’s hands clenched the arms of the chair, his knuckles turning white. Dumbledore regarded him sadly. The poor man was suffering, and it was entirely Dumbledore’s fault.

“Please, Severus.”

Snape sat silently for a minute, his breathing ragged. “Fine!” he suddenly shouted. “Fine.” His shoulders shuddered for a moment. Dumbledore wished he could comfort him but now wasn’t the time. Instead, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a small, silver necklace. The pendant showed a moon, and he handed it to Snape. Snape looked at it in disgust.

“It’s a portkey to Sirius’ room. Take hold the pendant and think of him, and you’ll be immediately transported to his quarters. I would like you to start tonight.” Severus stood up and twisted the necklace in his hand. He stared at Dumbledore for a moment, his expression unreadable. Dumbledore hoped he wasn’t making a severe mistake, but his gut told him otherwise. Whatever would happen would work itself out to help both of his broken boys. It would be hard at first, but he was certain it would end beneficially. All they had to do was work out thirty plus years of resentment and hatred towards each other.

Before Snape reached the door, he lifted the necklace around his neck and clasped it shut. He quickly tucked it under his shirt. Without looking back at Dumbledore, he quickly left the room.

Dumbledore sighed. “Well, that could have gone a lot worse.” Fawkes cawed in agreement.

Severus Snape wanted to be angry. He wanted to be livid over what Dumbledore had forced him into, furious over the fact that he had agreed to share a bed with Sirius Black. He wanted to rush back into Dumbledore's office and object to his ludicrous idea. He wanted to do all of this, he knew he should do all of this, but he was just so…tired.

Exhaustion padded his mind, acting like a heavy anchor sinking into his subconscious. He couldn't remember the last time he had slept well. Certainly before the Dark Lord's return, but then the days started to blur.

It wasn't like he didn't want to sleep. He really did. Those few hours of blackness and oblivion felt like salvation from the clattering in his head. Memories would dissipate and pain would fade, until, of course, the nightmares jerked him awake and left him more scared and agonized than before. Events would be replayed in his mind with startling vividness. The blood seemed bloodier, the corpses seemed colder, and the pain always cut deep and hard. It took him a while to recover, but once he did, any hope for more sleep was dashed. He felt lucky if he got more than a few hours.

That was, of course, if he could fall asleep at all. And usually, he couldn't.

Maybe Dumbledore had a point. Maybe the crazy old man actually had stumbled upon some realization that would finally let him sleep. Or maybe the crazy old man was just a crazy old man intent on wreaking havoc in Severus's life.

He didn't know. He didn't care. He needed to sleep.

But he couldn't. Not tonight. The Dark Lord would surely call with pain that snaked up Severus's arm, and he never slept when the Dark Lord called.

With a few hours remaining until nightfall, Severus stumbled to his room. He warily regarded the bed before turning to his cauldron. The Dark Lord had requested Mille Poenarum Noctibus, a fiendishly tricky concoction. It would take Severus the next few hours to finish the potion, and by then the Dark Lord would call.

Sirius Black stared at the clock. The clock stared back at him.

Sirius Black stared harder at the clock. The clock simply ticked along.

Sirius sighed, leaning back into the bed. It approached one o'clock and the greasy git had yet to show up. Dumbledore had assured Sirius that Snape had agreed, but now it looked like the man had bailed. Fucking coward, Sirius thought, turning around in bed. Sleep rarely came to him, but it didn't stop him from trying. Every night, he would lie down and engage in a staring match with the clock, but nothing ever happened. He was stuck watching the clock, waiting for sleep that rarely came.

And now neither would Snape. Sirius shut his eyes. Sure, he wasn't happy that Dumbledore's choice was Snape. He hated that man, hated him since the moment he met him and would probably hate him until he died. It was just the way it was. So spending two weeks in bed with him wasn't ideal. But so was not ever falling asleep, so Sirius was caught in a bind.

With great reluctance, Sirius had agreed to Dumbledore's conditions. In two weeks, it would probably all be over anyway, so in his classic what the hell moments, Sirius just went for it. Of course, the man wouldn't even be bothered to show up.

Sirius sat up in bed. He wanted a glass of water, but just as he was standing up, a thump reverberated through the room.

"Fuck," he exclaimed, startled by the sudden figure standing in front of him. "Well, it took you long enough," he muttered.

Snape just nodded. Sirius rolled his eyes and lay back down. "So we going to do this or not?"

No response.

"For fuck's sake, you can talk to me."

No response except for the sound of shuffling across the wooden floor. The bed dipped suddenly, and Sirius felt Snape lie down.

Sirius chuckled. "Well it looks like I finally got you into my bed."

No response. No whipping insult. No angry comeback. Nothing.

Sirius sat up again, turned on the light, and looked over at Snape. "Shit," he muttered, gazing at the man. Snape's eyes were clenched tight, his lips a nearly invisible line, and worst of all, tremors wracked his hands. His chest rose and fell quickly, disrupted by haggard breaths. Sirius lifted a hand and pressed softly against Snape's forehead. It wasn't hot, so it couldn't be a fever. Snape muttered something.

"Huh?" Sirius leaned in closer.

"Cruciatus," Snape said again, his teeth clicking together on the last syllable. "Should…be…ov…over…in…thirty…thirty…minutes."

Sirius sat back and stared at his sworn enemy reduced to a shuddering mess. It wasn't right seeing

Snape like this. Snape was cool and unflappable. He was controlled. Now, he seemed like none of that. He looked like a man in pain.

Cursing Dumbledore, Sirius laid down again. Snape was going to hate him for this, but Sirius didn't know what else to do. He had little experience in dealing with the cruciatus curse, and none with helping Snape, but when he was little, Regulus often fell sick. To comfort his brother, Sirius would lie next to him and wrap his arms around Regulus's quivering and fevered frame. Then, he would hold on until the episode passed and Regulus stilled.

Repulsed at what he was about to do, Sirius scooted closer to Snape. His whole body shook with the aftermaths of the curse. Sirius reached out and lay an arm across Snape's chest. He pulled himself against Snape's tremoring form and lay his head down. He wanted to gag, but he felt Snape relax against him. Some of the tension eased from Snape's body. His breathing had evened just a tiny bit. Whatever Sirius had done had helped.

Wrapped around Snape, Sirius lay there. The tremors slowly subsided and Snape's breath evened out. Sirius could sense every movement of Snape's, casting away their privacy. He eventually lost track of time. His head fell against Snape's shoulder, and his arm rose and fell with every one of Snape's breaths. He didn't say anything, and neither did Snape. They just lay there together as a deep silence obscured the room.

At one point, Sirius shut his eyes. He could hear Snape's heart pulsing, a monotonous pounding that filled Sirius's consciousness.

When he opened his eyes, the heartbeat was gone. His head lay on nothing but a pillow. The spot next to him was empty except for a faint warmth. Sirius sat up slowly, blinking away the sleep from his eyes.

He sat like that for a moment before he realized his action. He was blinking away sleep! Sleep, the fickle mistresses that had abandoned him, had returned in the night. He had slept, and with a quick glance at the clock, he had slept for six hours! He wouldn't even get six hours on a good night. This was cause for celebration! He should crack open the fire whiskey, and oh shit.

Sirius stilled. A gnawing feeling entered his gut. He put his head in his hand. He listed off some expletives. Of fucking course Dumbledore was right. Of fucking course, it had to be Snape. The only thing that could get him to sleep had to be that slimy Slytherin. He groaned and pulled at his hair. That slimy Slytherin had also suffered last night. He had been cruciatioed extensively because one go at the cruse wouldn't leave someone a shaking mess. It had to be Voldemort.
Sighing, Sirius stood up. He had all day to mull it over. And then he had a night to (hopefully) sleep it over in the fucking arms of Severus Snape.

For now, he would spend his time cursing Dumbledore.

Hi all! This story is a fun passion project I've had for a while, and I decided I might as well post it. I have a lot more of it written, but I can't make any promises about update speed. Regardless, I'll do

my best and I hope you enjoy.

Game

A knock interrupted Dumbledore's focus on a particularly interesting article in the Quibbler about a newfangled herb that exploded whenever someone sneezed. Glancing up, he called out for the person to enter. It was still rather early, so it could either be Minerva or…

"Ahh Severus, how are you this fine morning?"

Severus looked at him unamused. He walked up to the desk and sat down. He nodded curtly at Dumbledore. Dumbledore smiled back.

"If you have no interest in the morning, perhaps you can tell me about last night."

For a brief moment, Severus diverted his eyes. "The Dark Lord called me last night," Severus began and Dumbledore felt a sinking in his stomach. Voldemort did not act kindly towards Severus, and Dumbledore always worried whenever Severus had to spend time with him. "He's intent on remaining hidden and unknown but he may try to influence the ministry. He has yet to divulge how."

"Anything else?" Dumbledore inquired, and he swallowed as a ghost of pain flickered across Severus's face.

"No, that's all for now." Severus crossed his hands in front of him.

"Are you okay?"

"Yes," Severus responded bluntly, showing that he wasn't okay but he didn't want Dumbledore prying. Dumbledore knew he should, but he also wanted to hear about the rest of the night.

Pushing the concerns aside, he asked, "Did you make it to Sirius's?" Severus remained silent. Taking it as a yes, Dumbledore continued. "How was it?"

"Fine," Snape responded.

"Did you get any sleep?"

"Some."

"More than usual?"

Severus paused. "There were no nightmares." The words fell off his tongue unbidden, but Dumbledore smiled when he heard them.

"I'm glad to hear that."

Severus nodded once. He stood up and went to the door.

"Will you go back tonight?" Dumbledore called out at him. Severus stopped to think for a moment.

"You said two weeks," he answered before opening the door and leaving. Dumbledore gazed kindly at the place where Severus had just left. The poor boy had gone through hell, but he gladdened at the thought that his idea was working. Hopefully, the rest was reciprocal and Sirius had managed to sleep. He would have to stop by and ask. Regardless, the two men hadn't torn each other apart on the first night, and Dumbledore was always thankful for small victories.

The day passed quickly for Severus. Busied by his potions, reading, and grading of finals, he couldn't spare a thought for whatever had happened last night. He only knew that it left him feeling rested like he hadn't felt for months. He had managed to sleep and best of all, there were no nightmares. Usually, the aftermath of the cruciatus left him torn by nightmares his weakened mind couldn't fend off.

Dumbledore had stumbled across something, and as the clock struck nine and Severus reached for the silver pendant, he didn't know whether to curse the old man or thank him.

His hand paused before touching the necklace. Black had seen him weakened and in a state that few others had seen him in. Severus knew he would laugh at him. Old habits die hard, and Black never let go of an opportunity to tease and debase Severus. He shut his eyes and stilled his breathing. He wouldn't let anything Black said get to him.

With that thought entrenched his mind, he grabbed the necklace and thought of Black's ugly face. He felt the familiar whoosh of a portkey and in a few seconds he landed in Black's room. His landed gracefully, as opposed to the clunky fall last night. Then again, he had the cruciatus curse to blame for that.

Black looked up from a book and stared at Snape. Snape stared back before quickly glancing around the room. To his surprise, everything was neatly put away. A dark wooden dresser filled a wall along with a bookcase stocked with a significant collection of books. Pictures hung on one wall, smiling faces winking out against the grey wall. Sirius's bed, a large black thing with wooden posts, consumed the room.

"What?" Black asked accusingly.

Severus shook his head. "I thought your room would reflect your disheveled personality."

"Well, you don't know anything about me."

"And neither do I want to," Severus shot back. Sirius let out a small laugh.

Black paused, looking like he was about to say something but decided against it. "You want to sit?" He gestured towards a chair facing his.

Severus moved over to the chair and sat down. He glanced over at the table upon which sat various types of alcohol. "Ahh, there's your personality Black."

Black grunted. "At least I know how to have fun. You want some?"

"A glass of red wine if you would be so kind." Black poured two glasses and handed one to Severus. Severus took a sip, his lips crinkling around the liquid. They sat silently, but Severus couldn't help but notice Black fidgeting. Pressing his fingers against his temple, he sighed. "If you want to say something, just say it."

"This is really fucked up," Black blurted out.

"Really?" Severus responded, his voice dripping with sarcasm. "I hadn't noticed."

"Oh shut up."

“Classy, Black.”

Black ran a hand across his face. “Dumbledore really wants us to do this without killing each other, but if you keep this up, I don’t think I’ll be able to keep that promise.”

Severus laughed coldly. “I’m sure I can handle myself against a mutt like you.”

“Yeah, like last night?” Black shot back. The words faltered on Severus’s tongue. Now Black would mock him, just like he did all those years ago at Hogwarts. Instead, Black’s voice took on a gentle tone, and Severus looked at him in surprise. “What the hell happened to you?”

“It’s none of your business.” Severus couldn’t tell Black, he just couldn’t.

“Maybe it’s not, but I spent the whole night with my arms around you so I deserve to know what happened,” Black said as his voice hardened.

“Is it really so hard to figure it out, or does your mind work too slowly?”

“Drop the act, Snape. There’s no one here to fool.” Black ran a hand through his hair. “What I fucking figured out is that Voldemort crucioed you. And I know that you only get that kind of aftereffect if you were put under many, many times. So what I haven’t figured out is why your beloved master is spending hours cruciating you, okay? So what the hell happened?”

“He gets bored,” Severus whispered, his mind catching up after his words. He couldn’t go about telling Black everything that happened. He didn’t want Black to know anything, but saying those three words seemed to lift a weight off his back. He had kept his fear bundled up inside him, and to admit to a small fraction of it felt freeing. Severus scoffed. He was thinking too much into this, damn it.

“Bored?” Black repeated, “Doesn’t he have world domination to plan?”

Severus sat in silence, debating. He didn’t want to tell Black anything, yet at the same time, something inside him insisted he did. The silence stretched, and Severus sat torn inside his mind. He hated Black so the decision should be easy, but the feeling pestered him.

Black watched him, and as the minutes passed, he leaned forward. “How about we set some ground rules for whatever Dumbledore has gotten us into? And rule #1 is that nothing leaves this room. On pain of death or whatever, anything you say to me and anything I happen to say to you remains in this room.”

Severus regarded Black warily. “What if I tell you something horrible?”

“Then I’ve got to live with it the rest of my life. Same goes for you.”

“I don’t trust you.”

Black laughed bitterly. “Well, I don’t trust you either, but what else can we do?”

“Sit in silence?” Severus suggested coldly.

“I did that for fifteen fucking years in Azkaban. I’m not doing it again.” Black extended his hand. Severus stared impassively at it for a moment. He reached out and grasped Black’s hand. “Fine,” he muttered, shaking Black’s hand. After a moment, they withdrew.

Black laughed, causing Severus to wince slightly. “Dumbledore would be so proud

knowing that we just shook hands. Last year, I was going to rip your arm off."

"The feeling was mutual," Severus responded, relieved the laughter wasn't directed at him. He felt shaky. The ground was unfamiliar. He was surprised trust remained in his dictionary.

Black sipped the wine. "So you want to tell me what happened last night?"

Severus searched Black's face for any signs of malice, and seeing none, he magnified that small voice inside him. He knew he would regret it, but isolation had gnawed at him for too long. He had to say something, and for a reason that baffled him, it would be the truth.

Sirius didn't know what to expect. Sure, Voldemort was a dick, but Sirius thought he was only a dick towards Gryffindors and muggles. Certainly not to his fellow creepy Slytherins. Last night had changed that view, and now Sirius wanted to know why. If it included being nice to someone like Snape, he would deal. Anyway, no one deserved to be crucioed for that long, including Snape.

So when Snape opened his mouth, Sirius had no idea what he would say. He couldn't ignore its importance, however. Something inside Sirius told him that Snape hadn't told anyone else what he was about to reveal to Sirius. That made Sirius special, and he had no idea why.

"He gets bored," Snape began, the words clumsy and hesitant, "Especially since he's hiding."

"So he takes it out on you?" Sirius prodded gently. Snape appeared unsure and ready to fall silent at any moment.

"Sometimes. It depends on his mood, what he's interested in. He varies, but he likes…" Snape's voice hitched. Sirius's hand tightened around the glass. Fuck.

"He likes me," Snape whispered, closing his eyes. What the hell was he supposed to say to that? Sirius was so out of his league. Last night worked out way better than he expected, but how was he supposed to respond to the fact that Voldemort obsesses over Snape? Sirius gritted his teeth.

"Why?" he asked, the word falling uncomfortably from his mouth. He didn't like the new territory he had landed in head-first. "And don't tell me it's because of your ravishing good looks." He wanted to smack himself. His awful sense of humor wasn't going to help anyone here.

He caught sight of a small smile quickly gracing Snape's face, and the panic relieved. So the crony old bat had an awful sense of humor too. Maybe Sirius wouldn't muddle the whole thing up.

"No, Black. Though I know it's hard to resist me," he responded, glancing up at Sirius. His words didn't contain their usual bite, but at the same time, there were some remnants of the banter that defined their relationship.

"The only people who can't resist you are the blind."

"Do you respond to every uncomfortable situation with bad humor?"

"It's what I'm best at," Sirius jibed, winking. Amusement crossed Snape's face. "See, it's

working." He smiled cheekily.

Snape brought a hand up to his head. "Maybe Dumbledore did make a mistake."

"Funny, that's what my parents called me."

"Now you're just reaching."

He thought for a moment. "Yeah, that was bad. I'll give you that." He shook his head. "Anyway, I'm pretty sure we were at the part where Voldemort likes you." Snape's face instantly soured.

"Why do you care?" Snape inquired bitterly.

"Because I do, and Voldemort's a dick. He fucked me over, and I care if he fucked you over too."

"Eloquent," Snape snapped.

"I'm known for my gift with words. But enough about me, why does he like you?"

"He likes me because I don't…" Snape suddenly slumped in the seat. He glanced up at Sirius, and Sirius could see the exhaustion etched onto the man's ebony eyes. "It's hard to make me scream. He likes the challenge. I'm used to most of what he does so he has to be creative." The words tumbled from Snape's mouth like the soda cans James and Sirius used to shake up and let explode. Snape's confession had been buried deep, and even thought it came out painfully, it was exposing itself. Sirius happened to be the lucky bastard who heard all of it.

"Creative?" Sirius asked before he could stop himself. Snape nodded slowly. "You can tell me if you want."

"Can't," Snape forced out. "Not yet. I can't do it, please understand."

"Of course, you don't have to tell me anything you don't want to. It's okay," Sirius placated. It wasn't okay though. This was really fucking bad. Snape had never said please to Sirius. He had never told Sirius that Voldemort did creative things to him that he couldn't even talk about. The hard man Sirius used to know had disappeared and left someone hurting and open.

There was one question Sirius needed answering, and he could barely keep the rage out of his voice.

"Does Dumbledore know?"

Snape glanced up at him alarmed. "You can't tell him. You said everything I said stays here."

"I know, I'm not going to say anything. But does he know?"

Snape shook his head. "I've never told him. He…worries too much as it is. He has to win a war. I can't bother him with this."

The words punched a hole deep inside Sirius. Suddenly, Snape changed. The fear and softness had been shattered by a deep ridden bitterness and hatred. A hatred Sirius wasn't entirely sure was directed at him.

"You think I'm appalling, don't you?" Snape snarled, "I can't even take care of myself,

can't stand up to the Dark Lord. You can go laugh about it with your friends, I'm sure they'd think it's hilarious…"

"Shut up," Sirius interrupted, and Snape did. "Shut up, shut up."

Something sick settled on Snape's face. "I should have expected this. You're still the bully you always were. Oh look at Snivellus…"

"Listen to me," Sirius ordered. "Shut up and listen to me. First of all, I'm not going to laugh about you. Secondly, I don't think you're appalling. I think you're actually really fucking brave, okay? I doubt anyone else could do this. Thirdly, I understand. I know you don't believe that, but Azkaban messed with me. It did bad things to me. Remus asks me about it, but I can't bother him with it. He's got enough going on in his life without me explaining how bad it got. I don't need to make his life worse for him. So I understand. I understand why you can't tell Dumbledore even though it would help you."

"So what?"

"So what?" Sirius shouted, standing up. Snape winced beneath him. "So what? I think this is what Dumbledore wanted. We're both fucked up, so maybe we can tell each other why."

"So this is supposed to be therapy? You're not going to be my shrink, Black," Snape sneered.

"Well, lord knows I don't need help from you." Sirius took a deep breath. He sat back down. It was too late to go back now. "We need help. Can we at least agree with that?"

"You might need help, but I can assure you, Black, I don't need anything."

Sirius glanced up at Snape, surprised at how quickly the man had replaced the walls that kept everything hidden.

"You needed my help last night."

"I…" Snape faltered.

"How long did he crucio you for?"

"It doesn't matter."

"I want to know."

Snape swallowed thickly, and Sirius could practically see the walls come down again.

"An hour or so."

Sirius felt his breath leave him. A death eater had once crucioed him for a few minutes, and he felt like he would never escape the pain. He couldn't even imagine lasting for more than ten minutes, let alone an hour

"It wasn't continuous," Snape added, "And if you count, it's not as bad as you'd think it'd be."

"Snape, I don't think I could last thirty minutes. I didn't think it was possible to last more than that."

“It’s not easy.”

Sirius laughed humorously. “Jesus, of course it isn’t.” He paused for a moment, before deciding he might as well go for it. He needed to know. “When did you start screaming?”

Snape met Sirius’s gaze. His eyes were sad and cool like a pond reflecting moonlight. “About thirty minutes in, I think. I lost track of time. And he took more breaks in the beginning.”

Sirius really wanted to break every bone in Voldemort’s body. You really had to be a sick bastard to do shit like this.

“And once he was done, you came to me.”

Snape nodded. “It helped, you know, what you did last night. I hadn’t…” Snape’s brow furrowed and he let out a deep breath. His eyes bored into Sirius, and Sirius caught sight of the oddest thing. He could almost sense an innocence from Snape, which didn’t make sense. The man had seen thing most people couldn’t even imagine. How could Snape maintain any pretense of innocence? Yet, there it was. It was almost childlike, and it so open and fragile, it frightened Sirius that he might break it.

“You hadn’t what?” Sirius asked gently. He had discovered something in Severus that he doubted anyone else knew about. He knew with a deepening certainty that whatever happened tonight would last much longer than two weeks. And of course, he thought ironically, it had to be Severus Snape.

“I hadn’t been,” his voice broke off for a moment, “held like that for a long time. I…I can’t remember the last time.”

Sirius stared at Snape for a long moment before standing up. Reaching out, he waited for Snape to grab his hand, which he did. Sirius led him to the bed, and before he could rethink his action and its consequences, he lay down. Snape followed his lead. He debated whether to pull Snape onto his chest, but decided instead to spoon him. That way he could wrap himself around Snape and hold him.

Snape watched him warily. His face, smeared with exhaustion and that peculiar innocence, emitted confusion. Sirius gently turned Snape onto his side, and he pulled himself up next to him. Wrapping his arm around Snape’s waist, he pressed his forehead against the back of Snape’s neck and hooked an ankle underneath Snape’s. Snape’s breath hitched at the action, and with anyone else, Sirius would ascertain its sexual nature. Not with Snape, however. Not with someone who hadn’t been held like this for years. No, tonight they would just sleep.

Frost

"Why, what's the matter,

That you have such a February face,

So full of frost, of storm and cloudiness?"

William Shakespeare, Much Ado About Nothing

Dumbledore hummed to himself. Sirius glanced up from the end of the table.

“Do you want something?” Sirius asked.

“These eggs are simply delicious. Do you add anything special to them?”

“Salt and pepper, but that’s it.”

“Regardless, color me impressed.”

Sirius shifted in his seat as Dumbledore continued eating the tray of eggs. The room was empty except for them.

“If you want to ask you can,” Sirius said, glancing up at Dumbledore.

“Well then, how did you sleep?”

“I slept,” Sirius responded. Dumbledore smiled.

“So he’s helping?”

“I guess. I don’t know. It’s complicated.”

Dumbledore chuckled. “I’m sure it is. Severus has never been easy to understand.”

“You can say that again,” Sirius muttered. Dumbledore started intently at Sirius, and Sirius was certain that he *knew* everything that happened. The vivid blue eyes could see right through Sirius.

“I’m glad to hear it working out. I expect you’ll see him tonight,” Dumbledore stated, waving his dish to the sink. Sirius nodded. “I must go. There’s supposedly a rather nasty boggart terrorizing some first years, and I’m supposed to take care of it. It’s unfortunate that the Defense Against the Dark Arts professor was predisposed early this year. Have a good day, Sirius.”

Sirius blinked and Dumbledore disappeared, apparated away to Hogwarts. Sirius yearned to do that himself, to see Harry, but he couldn’t leave the godforsaken house. As a wanted convict, he didn’t have the luxury of wandering around in the day.

Instead, he would spend all day stuck, itching to get out. The only thing he had to look forward to was the night and Severus Snape.

He laughed out loud at the thought. Less than two days ago, that thought would have never crossed his mind in his wildest dreams.

Severus couldn't breathe. Not since last night, not since he laid his heart bare for Black to witness. His walls had fallen and all it had taken were a few gentle words. He thought he was better than that, but when Black had looked at him and asked him those questions, he couldn't stop himself. He couldn't stop it when Black led him to bed and wrapped himself around and held him throughout the night. At that point, Black could have asked anything from him, and he would have done it. He would have told him anything including his father.

The thought terrified him. Two days, and now Severus couldn't imagine not wanting to spend the night with Black. Dumbledore must have done something to him. A spell or a potion that manufactured a distorted sense of love possibly combined with verisetarum that prevented Severus from hiding the truth. If anything, that was it. Dumbledore, so intent on his experiment succeeding, that he had put a spell on Severus to ensure it would.

Trying to convince himself of that theory, Severus glanced at the clock. He had about thirty minutes until Black, and nothing left to do except brood. Unlike most other nights, he had the energy to brood. Whatever Dumbledore had intended had worked, and while Severus hesitated to admit, he slept well with Black.

Nightmares had yet to plague him, he fell asleep quickly, and he slept for a previously inconceivable amount of times. Last night, he had even reached eight hours. He wanted to scorn the situation but couldn't ignore how much it had helped.

Glancing up at the clock again and seeing that only a few minutes had passed, Severus shrugged and reached for the pendant. There was no point in waiting around. He might as well see Black and let the night progress as it will.

Reassured by the fact that everything his insolent mouth said remained in Black's bedroom, Severus reached up, grabbed the pendant and wished his location away.

Opening his eyes, Severus viewed the now familiar room. Everything remained the same with Black curled up on the chair and reading a book. A glass of red wine sat next to him with another placed on the adjacent chair. Severus walked over and sat down, picking up the glass. Black continued to read.

"*Much Ado About Nothing*? I wouldn't have thought you as the Shakespeare type." Severus sipped his wine.

Black glanced up, "Seeing as it's just a bunch of dick jokes and stupid romances, I don't see how you couldn't." He placed the book down, folding the page in to mark his spot. "I started reading him when I was eleven because my parents hated it. They wanted me to only read books by purebloods, so I decided to find as many muggle authors as I could."

Severus tilted his head. "My peers in Slytherin would mock me when I read Austen or Dickens or Hemmingway."

Black snorted. "You read Austen? And you think it's weird that I like Shakespeare?"

Severus scowled. "I quite like Austen. She's more than just romance."

"But she is a hell of a lot of romance. Mr. Darcy, Mr. Darcy," Black crooned, laughing softly. "I like Austen too, don't worry. It's just funny to imagine you engrossed in *Pride and*

Prejudice or *Emma* or something like that. You look like you read depressing Russian literature."

"Well I do that too," Severus huffed. Black smiled and ran a hand through his hair.

"My teenage self would think I'm insane right now. Talking literature with Severus Snape."

"You're not alone. My teenage self didn't even think you could pick up a book, let alone read."

Black clutched his heart. "Oh fair mistress, your words harden like daggers pressing into my soul. No one else in fair London could recognize this agony. Oh fair mistress, take your gentle tongue and release me from this pain."

Severus rolled his eyes. "I stand corrected. Shakespeare fits you perfectly."

Black drank from his glass. "That's how I got all the girls," he said, winking.

"Hmm?" Severus responded.

"I would quote Shakespeare at them, and since most of them were purebloods or half-bloods, they hadn't read him so they didn't recognize it. Instead, they thought I was some romantic and lyrical genius. It never failed." Black added proudly.

"Oh," Severus began, alarming Black at the downtrodden tone. "That's who I should have quoted instead of my go to Orwell. I could never understand why they didn't appreciate it when I whispered 'Big Brother is watching you' right before I tried to kiss them."

Black laughed loudly, startling Severus.

Severus watched him, his eyes softening slightly. He knew he should hate Black, and he still did, but it was no longer that vicious malice that infiltrated every dialogue. It had changed, just like about everything else over the course of the past two days.

"You're not as bad as I thought you were," Black said, the humor replaced by the same gentleness that had compelled Severus to confess last night.

"Likewise." The word stumbled in his mouth, but it came out and Black smiled softly in response.

"Look at Snape getting all soft."

Severus scowled again. "Don't worry, I still hate your guts. Just slightly less."

"Good to know," Black responded, lifting his hands over his head and stretching. "You tried yet?"

"I'm always tired, Black," Severus shot back. The smile faded from Black's face.

"Yeah, I suppose you are. What is it, nightmares?"

"Yes," Severus responded bluntly. "And you?"

Black tapped his head. "My stupid brain won't even fall asleep."

"Did you have a similar problem in Azkaban or is it recent?" Severus asked, cursing at his interest. It would be best if their problems remained hidden from each other, but after last night, it

wasn't going to be an option.

Black shut his eyes. "I guess Azkaban. I didn't really, I guess you could say, exist in Azkaban. I would usually lie down and shut my eyes, but I didn't…Have you ever completely lost track of time? Like for a week, you'd be hard-pressed to say if it was night or day?"

"Yes, I have," Severus responded, closing his eyes briefly as the memories surged. "I know the feeling."

"In the beginning, I would just sleep a lot, but as the years went by it became hard to know the difference from consciousness and unconsciousness." Black's breath caught on something. "I was just *there* in Azkaban. And now, here, it's hard for me get used to this. I try to sleep, but nothing happens. All the time, I'm so awake. It's been two years since I got out, so shouldn't this be easier?" Black's voice turned sour at the end.

"Nothing is ever easy for us."

Black laughed bitterly. "You can say that again." He opened his eyes and peered closely at Severus. "What're the nightmares about?"

"They vary. Usually, it's just memories." Severus could feel the pain rippling beneath the surface of his mind, but he pushed it away.

"So like stuff Voldemort has done?"

Severus nodded curtly. "Usually." Black ran a hand across his face.

"He's done some really bad shit to you, hasn't he?" Black's hand tightened around the glass of forgotten wine.

Severus paused. Words failed him. Luckily, Black picked up on his thought.

"Fuck, I always thought Voldemort took care of his own. If you were a death eater, then you were good with him unless if you betrayed him or messed up. It didn't cross my mind that he would be hurting you like this. I thought he would want to torture muggles, not purebloods."

"I think you forgot that I serve a sadistic madman," Severus responded, considering how much he wanted to tell Black. Black stared at him, his eyes dark and gentle, and Severus could feel the voice loudening inside him. "It's not all what he's done to me. Lot of the time, it's what he's made me do."

"Like what?"

"What do you think?" Severus grimaced. His fingers twitched on the chair's arm. Black remained quiet. His eyes flickered, and something passed over them that Severus couldn't identify.

"Why did you agree to join him?' Black asked softly. The question held too many possibilities, too many avenues of error, and Severus could feel Black's hesitance. Severus could feel himself freeze. He didn't want to talk about this. He had never talked about this to anyone.

Standing up, Severus glanced at the bed. "I think I've had enough conversation for tonight."

Black stared up at Severus, and for a moment, Black looked like he would agree. But then the stubborn mutt overrode his hesitance.

“I haven’t. Sit down, Snape. I want to know why you joined him in the first place.”

After a moment, Severus sat down. The words wouldn’t come; he didn’t think he could do this. He hoped Black would give up and let them go to bed.

Black gave no indication that he would. Instead, he stared stubbornly at Severus. Frustration flickered across his face, before a realization struck him.

“You’ve never told anyone before, have you? You don’t know what to say.”

“I think we should go to bed, Black,” Severus placated, but it didn’t help. Instead, Black reached out and grabbed one of Severus’s hands. Severus stared down at the intrusion of his privacy and prepared to slap Black’s hand away. However, Black’s fingers wrapped around his own, and Severus felt something weaken in his mind. Black’s hand emitted a warmth, and his icy hand yearned for it.

“You can take your time. We have all night,” Black offered, and Severus felt something start to shake inside of him. He was going to do it, the emotions had started to bubble to the surface. He bit his lip and slumped down in the chair. He hated his weakness, hated how Black could pry anything out of him. He wanted to scream, but instead, his mouth betrayed him.

“I was…young and desperate and lonely. I was in a bad place.” The words fell out of his mouth in a shameful confession. Black had been beloved as a teenager, and Severus had never shared in any of that comfort.

“I needed something, someone, anyone who would believe in me. Tell me that I was worth something. Even if it wasn’t much, I just needed to know that I wasn’t…” Severus choked on the words tumbling out of his mouth. He had lost control and reviled himself for that. His position didn’t enable to yield his heart like this, but he found he couldn’t stop.

He took a deep breath to stabilize himself, avoiding Black’s earnest eyes. “He did that. He saw how much I was hurting, how far I would be willing to go to feel valued. I didn’t take much to make me fall for him” Severus’s hand tightened around Black’s. “Once I had the mark, it was too late to reconsider.” The pressure in his chest slightly released, and he tried to untangle his hand from Black’s. Black wouldn’t let go, so he abandoned his efforts.

Severus, who was usually so comfortable in silence, grew anxious when Black didn't to respond. Fears over what he had done crashed over him. He had willingly handed Black weapons that could sear the parts of himself he held hidden deep inside. He had exposed himself, and now he could do nothing but bite his tongue and keep his gaze firmly away from Black.

“It’s my fault, isn’t it?” Black inquired painfully, breaking the silence that had fallen thickly in the room. Severus startled at the question.

“No, don’t put the blame of my action onto you. I chose to take the Dark Mark, not you,” Severus assuaged, even though he could feel the bitterness rising up in him.

“If I wasn’t such a dick to you at Hogwarts, you might not have felt like you needed Voldemort,” Sirius began. He brought his hand up to his face, and the level of self-loathing in his voice surprised Severus. He had never thought Black beyond his typical arrogance and nonchalance.

“Don’t be so conceited, Black. I don’t decide my life around you,” Severus stated, hoping to shift Black’s self-hatred into hatred directed at him. Black shook his head.

“But it was me and James, wasn’t it?” Black asked despairingly. For a brief moment, Severus almost wanted to laugh at the ludicrousness of the situation. He had never seen Black wrapped up in guilt and self-hatred before, and it didn’t befit him.

“No,” Severus insisted. Black looked at him in disbelief.

“You don’t need to lie to me,” he spat out.

“I’m not,” Severus stated, surprised at the sincerity of his words. “Sure, you and Potter certainly lent a hand. I can’t deny that. You exacerbated an already horrible situation, but you *didn’t* create the horrible situation. There were many other forces acting on me at the time, many of them much worse than you could ever hope to be. Listen to me, Black.” He reached to grab Black’s other hand and intertwined their fingers. “It will never be your fault for what I did. You will never bear the responsibilities for my choices. Do you understand?”

Black drew in a shuddering breath. “I had a lot of time to think in Azkaban. Too much time. I came to regret a lot of the stuff I had done. I should have killed Pettigrew when I had the chance. I should have protected James and Lily. I should have been there for Harry. I should have helpeRegulusus. I shouldn’t have done the shit I did to you.” He paused and breathed heavily. “Lying there day after day, year after year, I came to hate myself for it. I’ve never hated anyone more, not even you.” His face became haunted and gaunt.

“Look at me, Sirius,” Severus ordered gently. It was the first time Severus had used Black’s first name, but it felt apt for this situation. Black’s eyes opened, and Severus troubled over the darkness he found in them. Azkaban had robbed Black of all the light that made him shine at Hogwarts, and Severus suppressed the urge to pull him close.

“You are not the only one haunted by what could have been. I have made mistakes for which I would forfeit anything to correct. I know what it is like to hate oneself. You are not alone,” Severus concluded, unsure if his statements would have any effect on the grieving man.

Black’s eyes searched Severus’s, causing him to shift under the intense stare. A multitude of emotion shot across Black’s face. The moment stretched. Then, something appeared to shatter inside Black. He keeled over, and his breathing devolved into sobs. His back shuddered.

Severus gazed down at the man. Alarm spurred his heartbeat, and he searched for a solution. He couldn’t leave Black alone and crying. Even though he paraded himself around as heartless, he was not a cruel man. He wanted to help Black, help him like Black had eased Severus’s pain the night before.

Awash with the memory, Severus settled on what to do. His confidence faltered; his expertise in comforting people was limited at best. He didn’t want to worsen the situation, but inaction helped no one, so with a hesitant hand, he lifted Black’s shoulder.

Black’s face had tightened with pain, his eyes red and unseeing. Severus brought a hand to his wet cheeks and gestured him upwards. Black followed with actions slow and submissive. Using the momentum, Severus placed one arm around the trembling man and led him tenderly to the bed. Black’s feet dragged across the floor, but Severus managed to navigate him successfully.

Upon reaching the bed, Severus helped Black lie down. The man moved unconfidently, and Severus keenly recognized the feeling of unawareness and apathy caused by a consuming pain. With Black down, Severus moved to the other side of the bed and crawled in. Looking at Black reassured him of his decision, and he shifted towards Black. Placing an arm around Black, Severus pulled him closer and let him bury his head onto Severus’s shoulder. The tears wet the fabric, but

Severus didn’t give a damn.

Instead, he brought his hand up to stroke through Black’s hair. The cool, luscious hair coiled around his hand and the steady petting motion seemed to lessen Black’s sobs. Black remained a shuddering mess, however. His agony radiated deep, and Severus knew his measly actions could do nothing to stop it.

He lay there, instead, letting Black seek out his warmth and sink deeper into him. With all the space eliminated between them, Severus pushed past his discomfort and the itchy sensation settling on his skin and let Black’s sobs run their course. The night drifted away and eventually, Black’s cries subsided. After a while, they disappeared fully, and steady breathing replaced them. He remained closely drawn to the other man, and while Severus attempted to shift away, Black only held on tighter. Stuck in Black’s embrace, Severus succumbed to the night and let sleep wash over him.

Broken

The world breaks every one and afterward many are strong at the broken places. But those that will not break it kills. It kills the very good and the very gentle and the very brave impartially. If you are none of these you can be sure it will kill you too but there will be no special hurry."

A Farwell to Arms, Ernest Hemingway

Sirius Black woke up surrounded by warmth. In Azkaban, warmth had been but a distant memory as cold fog and briny sea water soaked his skin. He tried distancing himself from the warmth since it so clearly did not belong. As he did, he felt Snape's hand dislodge from his hair, and the man mumbled something that sounded like an objection.

Hearing that sound, Sirius reoriented himself and the confusion dissipated. He decided to forfeit his efforts to get away. Snape was still sleeping, and he hadn't been this warm in gods know when. Even for the last two nights, Snape would always leave before Sirius woke, leaving only the faint remnants of heat. This morning, Snape's warmth had settled onto Sirius's skin, and he couldn't bring himself to break it off. Instead, haziness descended over him, and he sighed into Snape's shoulder. He drifted away until a sudden hook of a memory submerged itself into his mind.

Gasping, Sirius replayed the events of the night. A sudden desire to scream overcame him. He had broken down in front of Snape, he had lost control and started *crying.* He didn't cry anymore, not after Azkaban took everything from him.

As thoughts raced through his head, Snape must have woken because he suddenly tensed and tried to push Sirius away. Sirius moved away, regretting the loss of warmth but glad that their contact had ended. Snape abruptly sat up and buried his head into his hand. Sirius watched him.

"Guess we're even now," Sirius said, turning away from Snape. Snape let out a dry laugh.

"You going?" Sirius asked. He looked at the clock which looked back at him with a 5:30. Another long night of sleep. If he wasn't careful, he was going to get used to it.

"Yes," Snape stuttered out. "I have potions I need to attend to."

"At 5:30?"

Snape fell silent. His fingers sifted through his hair.

"You coming back tonight?"

"Yes, I will. I…"

"Yeah?" Sirius urged.

"I didn't know what to do last night. I hope what I did was appropriate," Snape continued with great difficulty. Sirius doubted this was a common occurrence for him.

"What? You're telling me you don't know what to do with a grieving escaped convict? I'm

ashamed of you, Snape," Black deadpanned. "Don't worry. You did fine considering the circumstances. And I slept. That's more than I can ask for on a normal day."

Snape nodded, solaced by the words. He stood up and reached for his neck. "I'll see you tonight, Black."

"Wait," Sirius began, unsure of what he wanted to do. He needed to do something, though. They couldn't keep on pretending like this was nothing. Sirius was too tired to play games anymore. "Call me Sirius."

"Sirius," Snape tested, the name rolling off his tongue like the gentle crash of a wave. Sirius liked the way his name sounded coming out of Snape's mouth. "Very well. I'll see you tonight, Sirius."

"See you then," Sirius paused and waited for Snape to fill in the blank. The man was a stubborn ass, but hopefully, he wouldn't ignore the gesture.

"Severus," Snape offered quietly. Sirius flashed Snape a smile.

"See you then, Sevvy."

Sirius could swear Snape groaned before apparating out the room.

Stretching, Sirius stood up. He wouldn't be able to fall back asleep, so he might as well start his day. A shower, breakfast, and maybe he would read some. Remus was supposed to come over later, and he didn't know if Dumbledore would stop by like he did yesterday. It didn't make much difference. The days at Grimmauld Palace felt endless while he searched for ways to keep his mind occupied. Usually, he failed. Today, however, he doubted it would be a problem. Severus…Jesus, that sounded weird in his head, Severus had catalyzed a whole stream of doubt, confusion, and upheaval, and now, Sirius had to attempt to sort it out.

Before he knew it, the day ended. Dismissing his class and sending them terrorizing looks to study for their finals, Severus cleaned up the room and retreated to his quarters. With nothing to grade and no potions to worry about it, Severus had nothing but his thoughts. From personal experience, he knew dwelling would only cause pain, so despite the fact it was still fairly early, Severus clasped the necklace and thought of Sirius.

When he opened his eyes, the room was devoid of Sirius Black. Growing irritated at his impatience, Severus debated returning to Hogwarts. He eventually decided against it, and instead, picked up one of Sirius's books. The title read *A Farewell to Arms* by Hemingway. He sat down and prepared to read.

Just as he had finished chapter one, the door burst open and Sirius barged in. Severus startled at the abrupt sound and stood up. Sirius caught sight of Severus, and a wide smile broke across his face.

"Sev!" he exclaimed, and before Severus could think twice about it, Sirius had crossed the distance and pulled him into a tight hug. "You wouldn't believe it, but I heard the best news." Without waiting for Severus to respond, he continued. "This summer, the Weasleys are going to be here and Hermione will spend time here, and Harry is going to come too! I'm not going to spend the summer alone."

He barely recognized the words as alarm spread through him. Hopelessness surged in him, and he screamed into the depths of his subconscious to not do this to him, not now, but it didn't listen or didn't care. He tensed against Sirius, and fear coated his throat. He had to get away. Straining against Sirius, he stumbled backward and his foot caught on the chair, causing him to careen to the floor. He landed hard. Sirius immediately crouched down and tried to help, but Severus pushed him away.

"Don't touch me," he whimpered. Shame screamed through him; it had been years, decades, but the terror remained. Sirius knelt down next to him, keeping his hands by his side.

"I'm sorry," Sirius offered, but Severus couldn't hear him through the rushing in his head. Time faded away from him, and he lay there until the rushing ended and he found he could breathe again. His heartbeat leveled as the terror subsided. The whole time, Black sat next to him patiently.

Finally, he felt comfortable enough to sit up. He kept his gaze fixated on the floor.

"Sorry," he mumbled. "It's not your fault. I overreacted."

"I shouldn't have rushed in like that. I won't do it again." Sirius thought for a moment. "Do you want to talk about?" His voice had taken on that gentle quality that made Severus weak at the knees.

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"No," Severus snarled. He could never talk about this, no matter how tenderly Sirius treated him. These memories would go with him to the grave.

"Okay," Sirius whispered. He leaned against the bottom of the bed, and after a moment, Severus joined him.

"What was the good news?" Severus asked, attempting to move past the previous event.

"I won't be alone this summer."

Severus tilted his head at that. "As the Order's base, wasn't that always the case?"

Sirius shook his head, and his enthusiasm seeped back into his voice. "The Weasleys will spend some time here, and Hermione and Harry might be able to visit. I won't just have to spend it with old men like you."

"We're the same age," Snape said dryly.

"Pretty sure you're a couple months older than me."

"No, I'm not. My birthday is in January. Yours is November. You're the old man here if anything." Sirius turned to Severus.

"You remember my birthday? It's almost like you care for me." Amusement lit up Sirius's sentence, and Severus relaxed as his panicked reaction was placed behind them.

"How could I forget when Potter would spend the whole week celebrating outlandishly?"

Sirius snorted. "I forgot he used to do that. Do you remember when he released all those doves everywhere in the Great Hall on my fifteenth, and they shit on everything? I think I broke a

rib laughing."

"I would prefer not to." Severus pointed his nose upwards. "They were always distasteful."

"C'mon, the school loved it," he teased.

"Except for the dove shit," Severus added begrudgingly.

"I'll give you that one," Sirius conceded. "But everything else was fantastic."

A knock on the door interrupted the conversation. Severus turned to Sirius and shook his head. It couldn't become common knowledge that he spent his nights with Sirius. If the Dark Lord ever caught drift of it…

Sirius stood up and went to the door. He opened it slightly and peered out.

"Remus? What brings you up here this fine evening?"

"Moody, Kinglsey, and I wanted a drink, and we were wondering if you'd like to join," Remus said, his voice drifting through the room.

Sirius sighed. "Not sure I feel up to it tonight, Moony."

"Is everything okay?" Remus asked.

"Yeah, everything's fine. Maybe another time." Sirius was doing his best to sound relaxed and nonchalant, but Severus could see right through it.

"You know, if you ever need to talk about anything, I'm here for you Pads," Remus offered.

"I know you are, Moony. You're my best friend." Remus regarded Sirius for a moment, before nodding.

"Well, if you want to join us, we'll be downstairs," Remus concluded.

"Sounds good, mate," Sirius said and closed the door. He turned around and returned to his position on the floor next to Severus. Severus stared at Sirius.

"What is it?"

"You can go with him if you'd like. You don't need to stay here for my sake."

"What? Sit down there and morosely stare into some whiskey while we reminisce over the good days. I'd much rather be up here with you."

"So you can stare morosely at me instead?"

Sirius smiled. "Of course."

"He's good to you," Severus said, leaning his head back.

"I don't deserve him."

"No, you don't," Severus agreed. Sirius huffed.

"Usually this is the point where you go of course you deserve him, Sirius, you're the best

person I know. Really, Sev," Sirius joked. For a split second, he could see a smile grace Severus's face. "Was that a smile I saw?"

"No," Severus scowled.

Sirius laughed. "It was. I didn't think this day would ever come. The world must be truly ending."

"Don't be ridiculous. I didn't smile," Severus protested.

"Ah, yes. Can't let people think you're anything other than the terrifying potions master. A smile would ruin your reputation."

"Oh, be quiet."

"Make me." Sirius's eyes darkened slightly, and Severus felt a tightening in his chest. He ignored the feeling. There was no way he would allow it to formulate into anything more.

"Silencio," he said and watched in amusement as Sirius's mouth opened and closed without any sound. "Much better," he sighed.

Sirius glared at him and crossed his arms. If Sirius wasn't silenced, Severus was certain a long list of expletives would fill the room. Severus let it drag on for a moment more, before lifting the spell.

"Not fair," Sirius muttered, frowning. Severus hummed and stared the wall across from him. Pictures adorned it, and curious, he stood up. His eyes flickered over the photos. Potter graced many, as he expected, and there was a fair amount of Lupin. Sirius must have torn Pettigrew out because some of the photos ended raggedly. The three men laughed in the pictures, swinging their arms around one another. Sirius looked happy.

As Severus gazed over the pictures, his eyes caught on one and he felt his heart beat quicken. Lily stared back at him with a smile gracing her beautiful face. Potter sat next to her, but he ignored the intrusion. Lily looked stunning in a dark sweater, and Severus couldn't tear his eyes away.

Sirius moved to stand next to him. "You can have that one, if you want."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Severus shot back defensively. Sirius shrugged off the lackluster excuse and tore down the photo of Lily.

"I guess you don't like James in it, but she looks beautiful."

"I don't want your photo," Severus responded. He turned away, but Sirius grabbed his hand.

"Take it," he ordered, pressing the photo into Severus's hand. After a moment, Severus complied and placed the photo into a pocket. He would have to tear off the part with Potter later without Sirius watching him. Severus displayed no indication of his thanks and glared at the wall.

"Rule Number 2," Sirius began, and Severus turned to look at him.

"Excuse me?"

"Remember our ground rules? I have another one."

Severus looked at him dryly. “What is it?”

“Rule Number 2 – no more pretending. I’m fucking done with games, and I know you are too, so how we about we cut the crap? If everything stays in this room, then we might as well keep all the lies and bullshit out,” Sirius explained, gesturing with his hands. Severus gazed coolly at him and hid his reaction. Sirius sighed. “This is what I’m talking about. Also, I know she mattered to you, so you don’t have to pretend she doesn’t. Maybe you have to out there, but don’t do it here.”

Severus smirked, but it was acrimonious. “May I remind you that I am a spy? I survive off lies.”

Sirius gestured again. “Okay, fine. But do it out there. Here, just…”

“Just what, Black?” Severus urged, reverting to Sirius’s surname.

“Just be yourself,” Sirius finished meekly.

“Do you hear how idiotic you sound? This isn’t some summer camp where we’re all going to be friends and celebrate our individuality. This is war. I cannot afford to be myself or I will die in agony. So don’t you dare go there,” Severus snarled.

Sirius started to raise his hands in surrender, but halfway through the act, returned them to his side. He formed fists. “You know what, Snape? I don’t buy that.”

Severus took a step closer and closed the distance between them. “Think carefully about what you are about to say.” His voice lowered an octave, and he saw Sirius gulp in discomfort.

“I did, and sure, with Voldemort, I can see why you couldn’t do that. You have to lie to him or else he’s going to kill you. And Dumbledore too because you don’t want him worrying about you. But with me, it doesn’t fucking matter. In here, things are different. You can actually act like a human being instead of a heartless snake. Drop the act, Snape,” Sirius seethed.

“You think it doesn’t matter? What if the Dark Lord ever gets hold of you? You’re reckless and senseless, so it wouldn’t be too hard for him. What if he tears apart your mind, which I can assure you, wouldn’t pose any difficulty to him? Suddenly, he knows everything about our game, and now, he’s going to torture me until I beg for death. The Order will lose its spy. It will weaken Dumbledore and provide an advantage for Voldemort. All because you want me to be myself?” Severus derided, his face twisted in anger.

“So what, you’re just going to bury everything and leave it to fester?” Sirius growled.

“It’s worked for me for thirty years. I see no reason why it needs to change.”

“Don’t give me that fucking excuse. You’re fucking miserable if the last couple of nights have anything to show for it.” Sirius’s tone took on an edge. “And you know what? You practically couldn’t wait to tell me your shit. This stuff has been stuck inside of you too long and left to rot, and you’re practically dying to tell someone. You want me to listen to you, and I will. I honestly will. But I won’t listen to any lies.”

“You don’t know anything about me,” Severus scoffed.

“So tell me.” Sirius lessened the anger in his voice but continued to stare heatedly into Severus’s eyes. “But don’t try to play any games.”

“And if I die because you’re too foolish to think rationally?”

“I’m probably going to be dead at that point anyway, so it doesn’t really matter to me.”

Tension radiated off the two men as they remained fixed on one another. Sirius focused so intently on Severus’s expression that he didn’t see the punch until it was too late.

Reeling from the blow on his cheek, Sirius lunged at Severus and brought them crashing to the ground. He landed a few blows on Severus’s face before Severus flipped Sirius over and returned the favor. They wrestled on the ground, but neither man could gain a significant advantage. They continued to struggle as fingers scraped into flesh and bruises blossomed on their cheeks. Sirius spat out some blood and tried to wrap his hands around Severus’s neck, but the slimy snake slithered away and left Sirius nothing but air. Severus reached for Sirius’s hair, but Sirius jerked away. He struggled to his feet, and Severus followed. The two men regarded each other warily for a minute.

“Fuck you, Snape,” Sirius declared.

“Fuck you too, Black.”

“I have half the mind to punch your ugly excuse for a face in.”

“I have half the mind to break every bone in your body.”

“Not if I get to you first.”

“I would like to see you try, old man.”

Sirius paused. Suddenly, the fight dissipated inside him, and he sunk onto the bed. He ran a hand over his tender cheeks. After a moment, Severus sat down next to him.

“Talk about cathartic,” Sirius muttered. Severus didn’t respond, but Sirius knew the fight was over for both men. “Want to hear something funny?”

“Depends.”

“I don’t really want to punch your ugly excuse for a face in. I guess I broke rule number two.”

“We’re both guilty,” Severus replied. Sirius tilted his head in confusion. “I don’t really want to break every bone in your body either.”

Sirius lay down on the bed. “How the hell am I supposed to explain these bruises?”

“You fell down the stairs.”

“Ten times?”

“It happens.”

Sirius snorted. “I’m sure Remus will buy that.”

Severus sighed. “I know a spell that will mask the bruises. I know how much your face matters to you.” His tone had lost all of its bite, and he lay down next to Sirius. He stared up the ceiling. Sirius looked over at him, and before he knew what he was doing, he had reached out and grasped Severus’s hand. The tension in the man eased. Sirius waited for Severus to speak, and after

a few minutes, he did.

"It's not as simple as you'd like it to be, Sirius. I can't stop in the way that you want me to. It's been too long."

"I know," Sirius agreed gently. "It was stupid of me to ask. Can I ask you something else?"

"I suppose."

"Can you at least try?"

Severus remained silent. His fingers tightened around Sirius. "Okay," he whispered in a voice Sirius could barely hear. "I'll try."

Twisting around until his whole body was on the bed, Sirius kept his hand interlocked with Severus. They lay in silence until sleep consumed them.

Wonderful

"How wonderful to be alive, he thought. But why does it always hurt?"

Doctor Zhivago, Boris Pasternak

Remus wouldn't stop staring at Sirius. Neither would Moody or Kingsley for that matter.

Sirius sipped his whiskey, trying to ignore the gazes. They proved too irritating, so eventually, Sirius turned to Remus. "What?"

Remus startled and coughed. "How was your night?" Remus ventured.

"Fine," Sirius responded. "Why do you ask?"

"Last night, we heard something fall upstairs."

"I tripped," Sirius lied. Moody watched him, his piercing blue eye scanning Sirius.

"Oh, okay." Guilt flashed through Sirius for lying to Remus, but he couldn't reveal the real reason. Severus Snape would kill him if he did. "I was worried something worse had happened."

Sirius chuckled. "Don't worry Moony. I can take care of myself."

"I know," Remus said, his voice soft. It sounded like he wanted to talk more, but it was nearing nightfall and Sirius needed to see Severus as soon as possible tonight. They needed to sort through what happened.

The guilt worsened as Sirius decided to leave. Remus honestly deserved someone better than him, someone who wouldn't lie or suddenly leave him. Unfortunately, Sirius couldn't be that man. With a sigh, he glanced towards the clock.

"I think I'm going to head up. See you tomorrow." Sirius stood while Remus nodded stiffly. Sirius made a quick exit in case Remus tried to keep him longer. He had spent the day contemplating Severus and wanted badly to talk to him.

Sirius walked upstairs and entered his room. Severus had yet to show, so Sirius sat down and started a fire in the ashy fireplace. He watched the flames, his mind drifting.

A crack disturbed him from his stupor, and he turned to look at Severus. He looked as immoveable and unemotional as ever. Sirius gestured towards the seat, and Severus complied.

Tapping his fingers against his leg, Sirius couldn't keep the words inside him any longer. They had sat formulating in his brain for the past few hours, and he needed Severus to know.

"I thought a lot today," Sirius began. Severus sighed and pinched his nose.

"My actions last night were extreme, I…"

"Let me talk first," Sirius interrupted, locking eyes with Severus. "As I was saying, I thought a lot today, and I need to say some things to you, and I need you to just listen.

“I don’t know how, but Dumbledore stumbled upon something when he forced us together. I haven’t slept this well in fourteen years, and I believe the same goes for you. But whatever this is, this is more than that. These past four nights have changed everything I thought about you. Last night, when we fought, clarified some things for me.

“And before you apologize for hitting me, I want to say I am genuinely sorry for bullying you all those years ago. Everything James and I did to you was cruel, unfair, and childish. I was an ass, and if I saw my teenage self now, I would hex him into next week. You don’t ever have to accept my apology, but I need you to know this.” Severus began to speak, but Sirius continued on.

“I fucked up a lot when I was young, but I never fucked up as badly then when I sent you to Moony. I had nightmares about it for a long time. It’s one of the worst things I’ve ever done,” Sirius said, feeling something sinewy twist inside him. “You deserve more than an apology though, but I don’t know to explain why I did it in a way that makes sense. The best I could come up with is that I was blinded by a hatred towards what you represented than what you actually were. You were everything my parents would have loved, so I had to hate you. I had to take out my anger and frustration on you even though it made everything worse. And when you started to snoop around, I wanted to…” Sirius’s voice broke. He always did horribly with confessions, and the memories stung like salt in a wound, but he soldiered on. Severus Snape deserved more.

“I wanted to scare you and hurt you. I wanted you to run away terrified from the Gryffindors because you never did despite everything. You remained defiant, and I hated you for it because you made me feel like I was losing. Even though I wanted to be good, I would never defeat the evil that lurked inside of me, and you symbolized that. I’m sorry; I’m not making any sense,” Sirius petered off. His limbs ached with a ghostly pain, and his mind felt as if someone had submerged it in a blender. Severus didn’t respond, and Sirius could sense their newfound connection snapping.

A sharp knocking on the door split the moment, and Sirius rushed to the door. He couldn’t face Severus anymore, so the interruption offered a respite. He opened the door slightly, shielding Severus. He expected Remus again, but instead, Dumbledore stared back at him.

“You can open the door more, Sirius. I know he’s in here,” Dumbledore said, smiling softly. Sirius opened the door and let Dumbledore in before once again closing it.

Severus looked up at Dumbledore. His face remained impassive, and Sirius knew he had fucked up again. Their nights together would end with his confession.

“Why are you here?” Severus asked. His voice rang through the room.

“I wanted to check in and see how you two are doing.”

“And you saw, so now you can go,” Severus responded with a voice like ice. Dumbledore’s eyes widened slightly.

“Now, my boy, I haven’t yet had the chance to check in.”

“What do you want me to tell you?”

“You two haven’t tried to kill each other yet, have you?” Dumbledore asked.

Sirius snorted, and Severus shot him a scathing look. Dumbledore turned to Sirius.

“Yes?”

“We threw a couple punches at each other last night, but we’re past it now,” Sirius explained, leaning against the wall. He could feel Severus’s eyes burning a hole in him.

“You might be past it,” Severus hissed, and Sirius did a double take at the venom in the man’s voice. He wanted to bash his head into the wall. He liked what they had, but he had to go about and fucking ruin it like everything else in his life.

“Severus, there’s no need to be so malevolent,” Dumbledore consoled. Severus stood up.

“It’s the only way Black can cram anything into that thick skull of his,” Severus said, his voice twisting on Sirius’s surname.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” Sirius shot back. Anger began to displace the regret and melancholy.

“Exactly,” Snape jeered.

“I said I was sorry,” Sirius exclaimed, throwing his hands up in frustration. Ire pounded in his veins.

“It’s too late for that.”

“Is it now?” Sirius laughed mockingly. “Fuck you, Snape. I thought you had changed but you’re still the miserable, cowardly bastard you’ve always been.”

“You tried to kill me, Black, and you want me to forgive you?” Severus seethed. “You’re nothing but an entitled Gryffindor who can’t see anything past your vapid arrogance.”

“Well I don’t see you apologizing for giving me to the Ministry so they could let dementors suck out my soul,” Sirius raged. Dumbledore had faded into the background, and Sirius focused entirely on Snape and his ugly, demented face. Sirius’s comments had caused something to flicker painfully against Snape’s face, so Sirius decided to take it further. “I was a sixteen-year-old boy, and you were a thirty-five-year-old man. So don’t you dare,” Sirius growled, “don’t you dare act like you’re an innocent victim.”

The sentence halted Snape. “I believe it may be time for this experiment to end,” Snape articulated. For a moment, Sirius considered agreeing with Snape. They had too many grievances and too much anger directed at each other. However, Sirius sure as hell didn’t want to go back to sleeping an hour a night, and he sure as hell wasn’t a quitter.

“So you’re just going to give up, then?” Sirius remarked. “Just like that? I guess you really are a…” Sirius trailed off. He could see the agony trace once again across Snape’s face. His comments were wounding Snape, and he remembered the night in which Snape had returned a shuddering mess. Snape could face extreme physical pain with a limitless bravery, but at the same time, his emotional state was in tatters. Sirius and Severus both knew it, and that shared recognition loosened something in Sirius.

“Can we agree,” Sirius began, trying to remove the anger from his tone, “that we’ve both done horrible things, okay?” Severus didn’t respond. “I don’t want to give up on this so soon. I think we can figure this out, despite all of this shit. But if you don’t think so, then go. We’ve hurt each other enough, and I’m tired of it.”

Severus stared at Sirius, but Sirius couldn’t fathom anything from Severus’s expression. His sincere desire for the man to stay surprised him, and he desperately hoped Severus would follow through.

Severus reaching up to his neck dashed Sirius's hopes, and before Sirius could utter another word, the man had vanished. Something dark gnawed at his chest.

"Sirius," Dumbledore began softly. Sirius winced at his voice. "What you did was brave. I will talk to him, and I'll help him see the errors in his ways."

Sirius shook his head. "Leave him be. I'm not going to force him to stay, and you shouldn't either. He's made his decision."

Dumbledore's blue eyes saddened, and Sirius felt a desperate urge for solitude.

"I'm sorry this couldn't have lasted longer," Dumbledore said as he moved over to Sirius and placed a hand on his shoulder. "He may yet come around, but whatever happens, thank you for giving this a chance."

Sirius avoided Dumbledore's eyes, and after a moment, the old man sighed and pressed a kiss against Sirius's forehead. The air cracked as Dumbledore apparated away.

Sirius wandered over to the chair and sat down. The fire mesmerized him. An achy numbness settled on him, and Sirius could feel a familiar hollowness widening inside him. His mind stumbled to a stop, and hopelessness pressed into him. He felt like this in Azkaban, but he didn't care enough to worry about that insignificant fact.

He lost track of time. His eyes blurred with the heat of the fire, but he couldn't bring himself to move. The rest of him remained numb anyway, so it wasn't like it mattered. Nothing mattered, truly, and Sirius was *stupid stupid stupid* to think so.

Sleep wouldn't come to him tonight, and it probably wouldn't come the next night or the next. The thought didn't trigger any emotion.

The numbness entrenched itself inside his chest, and not even a sharp crack could break him from the stupor.

Instead, it took coarse hands with elegant, pale fingers stroking his face to cause the hollowness to start to recede like a retreating wave. The hands pressed against Sirius's cheeks, and he leaned in as they traced his nose and cheekbones and forehead. The hands were cold, but they sent warmth coursing inside of him. He whimpered at the sensation and closed his eyes.

A voice called his name, and despite Sirius's attempts to ignore it, it persisted. Finally, he opened his eyes and stared directly into the face of Severus Snape. A multitude of emotions broke in Sirius, and he struggled to quantify the relief and confusion and concern and happiness and…

"Can you hear me?" Severus asked, his voice low and dark like whispers of leaves in the night.

"I thought…" Sirius mumbled, furrowing his brow.

"I had to get something." Severus removed his hands from Sirius's face, and he reached into his pocket. He withdrew a silver necklace. The delicate necklace looped around in a simple silver chain. A curling *S* sat in between both ends.

Severus grasped Sirius's hand and pressed the necklace into his palm.

"I don't understand," Sirius uttered slowly.

“This necklace was a gift from Lily when I was thirteen. It’s one of the most precious things I own.”

“Then why are you giving it to me?”

“I couldn’t bear the thought of never seeing it again. That way, when we fight like we did today and I stormed out of here, your possession of this necklace will force me to return to you. It’s my guarantee to you that I won’t leave without reason. No matter what you say, I will have to come back at least one more time.”

“But I thought you were angry at me?”

“I was, and if you’re still intent on these nights, I will tell you why.”

“Then why did you come back? I thought you were finished,” Sirius confessed, searching Severus’s face for signs of duplicity.

“I don’t want to give up either.”

The sentence broke over Sirius, and he felt like he could breathe again. Warmth infused itself into his heart, and the achy numbness faded into the background.

“I was so sure you weren’t going to come back.”

“What can I say? I’m full of surprises,” Severus teased lightly. Sirius grimaced.

“Wasn’t a very fun surprise, but I’m glad you came back.”

The words silenced Severus who wore an unfathomable gaze. Sirius opened his hand and looped the necklace around his neck. He clasped it and let it fall. The metal weighed assuredly against his skin.

“You better not lose it,” Severus warned, and Sirius smiled coyly at him.

“I guess you’re going to have to trust me.”

“I should have thought this through,” Severus groaned. Sirius laughed as levity upset the hollowness.

“Too late,” he joked.

Severus stood up from his crouch and sat in the opposing chair. He sighed. “I suppose I owe you an explanation now.”

“You don’t have to tell me anything you don’t want,” Sirius placated even though he desperately wanted to know. Severus smirked.

“You’re not a very good liar.”

Sirius huffed. Severus gazed at him in amusement.

“Regardless of your lackluster lying, I owe you an explanation for my reaction earlier.”

“I’m a dick; there’s nothing more to it,” Sirius explained, grimacing at his childish and cruel behavior.

“Don’t interrupt me, Black,” Severus ordered and Sirius shut up. “As I was saying, there is a reason I reacted so negatively, and it’s not just because you’re a dick. I’ve never said this before, so I’m uncertain of how this will procced. You asked me to try, so I will.

“I’m sure there’s no need for me to elaborate over the appalling nature of your actions. You terrorized a teenage boy and stole more from him than you could fathom. That’s why what you said made me furious.

“When I was eleven, I wanted nothing more than to be…” Severus halted. Sirius reached out to hold Severus’s hand. Even though Sirius thought it would be better left in cheesy romance novels, the contact calmed Severus, and he would need help as he struggled to formulate his thoughts. “I wanted to be your friend, Black,” Severus forced out. “Honestly, I wanted friends. Period. Lily was beautiful, but I wanted more. I was a lonely child, and I hoped Hogwarts would change that.

In the beginning, I was hopeful. I even considered that a friendship between us might emerge, despite our run in on the train. That didn’t exactly happen,” Severus trailed off. “When you started bullying me, I struggled to understand why. I knew you hated Slytherins, but there a lot of other Slytherins, so why focus on me? I entertained the possibility that you wanted my attention but quickly dismissed it. There must have been something wrong with me.

“When you mocked my oily hair, I started taking two showers a day. When you laughed at my posture, I forced myself to stand differently. When you ridiculed my good grades, I started failing classes. I was eleven at the time. I didn’t know any better.”

“Severus,” Sirius began, desperate to say something.

“What did I say about interruptions?” Severus warned, and Sirius shut up again. Severus took a deep breath and continued. “It didn’t work despite everything I did. You still loathed me, and I still didn’t understand why. I became convinced there was something wrong with you rather than me.

“In the second year, I realized I was wrong. Everyone loved you and Potter, and scarcely anyone talked to me. I started to blame myself for your hexes and jeers. I started to hate myself for it.

“As the years passed and you didn’t relent, my hatred hardened. I loathed myself, dreaded when I was alone but couldn’t break from the isolation. I…” Severus’s voice broke, “I *hated* myself, and I did things…” Severus paused. Pain flushed his face.

“You can tell me,” Sirius offered gently, and Severus regarded him warily. “Please.”

“Another time,” Severus whispered, shaking his head. “Tonight, when you provided an explanation for your actions and placed the blame on you, it awoke all of the hatred I felt as a teenager. I wondered what I would have done if I knew this the age twelve and didn’t have to sort through years of confusion, guilt, and self-hatred. The way you said it tonight as if it made perfect sense that the fault lay with you, it tore at me because I would have given anything back then to know I wasn’t to blame for the bullying,” Severus trailed off. He pressed his fingers to his temple. “That’s my explanation, Sirius. That’s why I was so angry.”

Sirius stared at the man. Thoughts whirled through his mind, and his throat had clenched making him feel like he was choking. “I don’t know what to say,” he stuttered out, “but I’m truly, deeply sorry.”

"You don't have to say anything, I just want you to know. And I think after all this time, I might be able to forgive you. As long as you promise never to call me Snivellus again."

"Of course. It will never pass my lips again. I much prefer Sev or Sevvy."

Severus shot him an annoyed look, but Sirius smiled. He took a deep breath. "Severus," he began, his voice serious, "I want to help you, but I'm not sure how. I'm not sure I can. We might be too old and too pained for us to move past it. I don't know. What you just told me, Severus, I'm not sure I can…it's difficult to verbalize, but I'm going to spend the rest of my life trying to make up for it."

"You don't have to," Severus countered.

"Yes, I do," Sirius responded defiantly. "It's the least I can do for you."

Severus fell silent, and Sirius could sense the gears whirling in his mind. A shift was occurring inside the man, something hidden surfaced. After a minute or so, Severus nodded.

"If you insist, Sirius," he conceded. "Perhaps you can start by…I don't want to presume."

"Oh, just tell me."

"Well, the last few nights in bed have been pleasant, perhaps you'd be willing to…" Severus faded, his voice hesitant. Sirius was struck by the contrast between the self-assured Potions Master and the frightened, solitary man in front of him.

"You don't need to ask," Sirius responded softly. "I like sleeping with you like this." The embers of the fire drifted through the fireplace. "Come on, Sev," Sirius said, "we've had enough for tonight."

Severus stood up and walked over to the bed. He lay down, pulling the blanket over him. Sirius paused, regarding the unusual scene, before joining Severus. It almost frightened him at how fast their relationship had changed, but he couldn't bring himself to care as he wrapped his arms around Severus. The other man pulled Sirius closer, burying his face into the crook of Sirius's neck. Sirius gasped at the desperate intimacy. He couldn't blame the man, it sounded like he hadn't been held like this in years. At the same time, Sirius had always viewed him as aloof and cold. Someone who would never easily join another in bed. The man who lay next to him was none of that. It was difficult to coincide the two versions of the same man, but Sirius found he much preferred the latter who let Sirius hold him throughout the night.

Sirius stroked a hand through Severus's hair, sighing at the warmth. The clock continued to tick on the wall, and sleep extended her silent hands to claim him.

Arbor

And so with the sunshine and the great bursts of leaves growing on the trees, just as things grow in fast movies, I had that familiar conviction that life was beginning over again with the summer."

The Great Gatsby, F. Scott Fitzgerald

June had rushed into July with August itching for its turn. While Sirius couldn't be outside to experience the changes himself, he noticed it in others. Mad-Eye especially seemed angered by the rise in temperature, while Tonks seemed to flourish in the scalding heat.

The past few weeks had been ones of constant activity for Sirius. Some of the Weasley's had moved in, including Ron, Fred, George, and Ginny, and Hermione had followed soon after. Everyone else came in and out frequently, sharing news and drinks. All in all, it wasn't so bad as far as prisons went.

Sirius still wanted Harry to spend the summer at Grimmauld Palace, but Dumbledore insisted that he remained at his relatives due to some special blood protection. It annoyed Sirius, and he had spent several nights complaining about it to Severus. He still hoped that Harry might be able to spend August with him, at the very least, blood protections be damned.

Then, of course, there was Severus.

When Dumbledore had first come to him with the idea, Sirius doubted it would last more than a week. They hated each other's guts and locking them in a room together would lead nowhere good.

But then, to Sirius's eternal surprise, it did.

The first four days were the most difficult. It took a lot out of Sirius to have those discussions with Severus, but they were desperately needed.

After those first four days, they slowly fell into a comfortable routine. Severus would appear at night, and they would talk. Their conversations ranged across a slew of topics from the distinction of Nordic Noir or their collective dislike of Professor Montague from their fourth year or the superiority between cats and dogs (much to Sirius's displeasure, Severus was a self-professed cat person). They would take about everything and nothing, and after those years of isolation in Azkaban, Sirius craved the motions of conversation.

It reassured him to talk about topics that weren't life and death or war-related, and he believed Severus felt the same. He felt surprisingly comfortable talking to Severus about any manner of topic.

Severus offered surprising insights, but most of all, Severus's sense of humor took Sirius off-guard. Sirius had always been aware that Severus was sharp and witty. It didn't take many arguments to realize that Severus could always come up with a scathing reply. Usually, that wit was turned on Sirius and he was too angry to appreciate it. However, when Severus turned it on others… Sirius hadn't laughed this hard since James.

Those nights tended to be the best.

Other nights, conversation would fall off or never start. Instead, they would sit in silence as Sirius read and Severus pored over potion formulas. Sirius felt something peaceful when he shared the silence with Severus, so he didn't mind those nights either.

Some nights, Severus would sharply appear in the room, his face closed off and a small frown pulling at his lips. On those nights, Severus would snap at Sirius. Any attempt in a conversation resulted in an argument. They would go to bed furious, and a resolution wouldn't be found until the following morning. Despite that, Severus never left him again. Not like he had on the fourth night.

Then again, Sirius got angry and snappy frequently. He hated being stuck in Grimmauld Palace. He hated spending all day inside the same eleven rooms. It drove him up the wall and he would take his frustration out on Severus.

However, nothing was as bad as the nights where the Dark Lord called. On those nights, Sirius would pace around his room, anxious and desperate for Severus's return. He had gleaned a better understanding of how Voldemort's meetings went, and they were hardly pleasant. He could only hope that Severus would show up in one piece.

Those meetings occurred once or twice a week, and each time Severus came back in a different state. Sirius had cataloged each date in his mind.

On June 12th, Severus had appeared with blood soaking his shirt. Sirius had almost had a panic attack at the sight alone. He had several lacerations weeping blood, but after downing several pain-killing potions, he was able to heal them with little difficulty. "They weren't done by the Dark Lord," he told Sirius. "Those are the ones that are a bitch to heal."

On June 17th, Severus had shown up, consciousness and uninjured but unresponsive. Sirius let him sleep.

On June 23rd, Severus returned with what appeared to be giant snake bites. Despite Sirius's best efforts, he couldn't get them to stop bleeding. Severus had told him to stop panicking and shut up. He proceeded to stitch the bite together in the muggle style, nearly blacking out from that pain alone. "Have to treat it like a muggle wound" he whispered. "Magic won't work."

On June 29th, Severus had returned and stood silently for several long minutes. Then, to Sirius's horror, he burst into tears. He didn't stop crying until he fell asleep. The next morning, Sirius had asked what happened, but Severus didn't speak.

On July 4th, Severus came back twitchy and angry. He jumped at Sirius's touch and proceed to yell at him, accusing him of terrible things. He had apologized the following morning, and Sirius had forgiven him.

On July 11th, Severus didn't show up at all, and Sirius spent the night in a torrent of worry.

On July 19th, Severus appeared with pallid skin. He struggled to formulate cohesive sentences and collapsed on the floor. He started crying again, his mouth working to form words that wouldn't leave. Tremors racked his body. He had clung desperately onto Sirius.

Every time, Sirius doubted his ability to handle this responsibility. The anxiety of the night and the inevitable fallout drove him to panic. However, he couldn't leave Severus. He owed it to

the man to be there when no one else was.

Their relationship was hardly one-sided. Despite Sirius's best efforts, his panic attacks would often emerge in full force. They had been a nasty side effect from Azkaban, and one Sirius had yet to shake. Since he was inside all day, everything felt terribly claustrophobic, so his current situation wasn't helping. While Severus couldn't stop them, he was an immense comfort. His presence alone lessened the worst of the effects and kept the terrifying numbness at bay.

With these past few weeks, Sirius couldn't deny that something was changing between them. Sirius's emotions, long dead in Azkaban, were finally coming back to life. Happiness was such a foreign concept after Azkaban that Sirius had initially struggled to put it together. Now though, he realized he was on the brink of a realization that he could no longer ignore. He would have to confront it at some point, but until then, he would value every night he spent with Severus.

And hey, nothing beat sleeping for longer than an hour a night.

Breaking

I have not broken your heart - you have broken it; and in breaking it, you have broken mine.

Wuthering Heights, Emily Bronte

AN: This is a dark, mature chapter where full warnings apply. All will be explained, and there will be significant mentions of rape and child abuse.

A headache pulsated in Severus's head, and his efforts to assail it had yielded nothing. A sharp pain would splinter his skull at irregular instances, but the agonizing pressure remained constant. The day had passed by in a blur, and by the time night came around, he was exhausted.

He wanted nothing more than to collapse into Sirius's bed and try to sleep away the headache. However, as he reached to his neck, a knock on the door sent spirals of pain through his head.

"Who is it?" he called out, wincing at the volume of his voice. The door opened and Dumbledore walked in.

"I wanted to talk to you. Is now a bad time?" Dumbledore moved up to Severus who began to shake his head but immediately stopped.

"No, it's fine. What is it?" he murmured. His vision blurred out for a second.

"How is everything with Sirius?" Dumbledore said quietly as if he could sense Severus's headache. Maybe he could; Severus still hadn't seen the full extent of Dumbledore's magic.

"Good," Severus pronounced slowly. The word rolled off his tongue like marbles. "He's been a great help, and I'm glad you started this." His heartbeat felt way too loud.

Dumbledore looked at Severus in concern. "Are you feeling okay?"

"I'm fine," he stated. Dizziness swept over him and he leaned forward before righting himself.

"I don't think you are."

"It's a headache, nothing more," Severus explained. The concern remained in Dumbledore's eyes. "Don't worry," he slurred, "Sirius will take care of me. He'll make sure I'm okay." His eyes fluttered shut as a throbbing ache suddenly laced his head.

"I'm sure he will," Dumbledore offered slowly. "Go to him, my dear boy, and get some rest."

Severus brought his hand up to the necklace and pushed past the pain to think of Sirius. It took a minute, but Sirius appeared and the portkey took effect. His landing sent jabs of pain searing in his mind, and Severus keeled over. He hadn't had a migraine this bad in years, and the pain was

unreasonable.

Sirius rushed over to him and swept him into his arms. A protest died on Severus's lips as the headache temporarily worsened. He raised his hands and cradled his head. Noting this, Sirius gently replaced Severus's hands with his own. Severus groaned in appreciation.

"What's wrong?" Sirius asked, his voice low and cool.

"Headache," Severus muttered through gritted teeth.

"Do you get them often?" Sirius inquired, and Severus wanted to sink into his voice. Its soothing tones salved the worst of his migraine.

"Sometimes."

"Are they usually this bad?"

Severus tried to think, but his thoughts had jumbled up. "No, I don't think so," he finally concluded. Sirius rubbed small circles into Severus's scalp, and Severus moaned. He had dealt with his other headaches alone, so the kindness was unfamiliar. Severus didn't want it to stop.

"Do you need me to do anything?"

"Stay with me," Severus faltered as dizziness overcame him.

"Of course. I won't leave you." Sirius's hand's continued to rub the reassuring circles on Severus's head. "Do you think you can make it to the bed?"

Severus puzzled over the question for a second. "Yes," he admitted, "need help."

"Okay, on the count of three, we'll stand up. One. Two. Three." Sirius lifted up Severus who sagged against him. They stumbled towards the bed, and Sirius sighed in relief when they made it.

Severus curled up in the bed, and his breathing quickened. His hands scrambled out as if searching for Sirius.

Sirius quickly joined Severus and positioned the man so that his head lay on a pillow in Sirius's lap. He returned to his previous action, and Severus moaned again. Heat dispelled through Sirius, but he ignored it. Severus needed him; he wouldn't get distracted.

They sat like that for a while. Sirius continued to stroke Severus's head, and eventually, the man stilled. His breathing evened. Sirius shut his own eyes. Hopefully, with Severus now asleep, he had overcome the worst of it.

Sirius regretted the fact that they weren't able to talk, but he couldn't blame Severus for his migraine. It looked agonizing, and Sirius morosely pondered the other times Severus dealt with it alone. No one should have to suffer this much without someone to help them reach the end.

He couldn't lie down without disturbing Severus, so Sirius drifted in and out of consciousness sitting upright. His neck pressed uncomfortably into the head of the bed. Half-dreams disturbed him. He slept fitfully.

At one point in the night, a movement drew him from a pungent dream of searing red. His mind remained in a hazy state of mid-sleep.

The movements were undefined as if they were struggling to understand the situation. It only took a few moments, because, the fingers, now reassured, moved carefully underneath the bottom of Sirius's shirt. The soft fingers traced his skin, and Sirius sighed. He tilted his head as sleep sifted through his mind. This wasn't his first time dreaming of being touched, and he would make the most of it while it lasted. Sex had been a scarce commodity for many years, and he yearned for the familiar mixture of lust, passion, and pleasure.

The fingers seemed to gain confidence because they began to move steadily lower. They paused at the line of his boxers, but only for a moment. Sparks illuminated Sirius's skin, and he moaned quietly.

The fingers descended lower, and Sirius tried to stifle a moan as they traced against the most sensitive part of him. With feather-light touches, they eased his cock from his pants and began to stroke it. His cock stirred and hardened. Sirius gasped as sensation flooded through him. Heat began to infiltrate his groin and stomach, and lust twinkled across his skin.

Sirius moaned again as the fingers strengthened the strokes and almost keened as the fingers wrapped around his cock and began to move steadily up and down. He wanted to cry out at the friction. Pleasure coiled in his stomach. Every thought dissipated in his mind as a warm mouth wrapped itself around his cock.

He cried out. His chest heaved. Pleasure stained his mind, and he struggled to breathe. The mouth was so warm, so hot, so pleasurable. Sparks ignited behind his eyelids. The mouth moved around his cock, and tension twisted his insides. He threw his head back, moaning into the night. His hands scuttled for something to grab onto, and one hit another body.

Horror descended onto Sirius, and in his fright, he pushed away from the person. His bare cock pulsed with need and demanded the return of the heat. Blood rushed through Sirius, and he had half a mind to push the head back down. Instead, with a large amount of willpower, Sirius turned away from the other person and pushed himself off the bed. He struggled to regain control of his breathing and think past the pleasure dominating his senses.

"No, no, no" he muttered, grabbing his head. A scream boiled inside him. He kicked a table hard. "No!" he shouted, pulling at his hair. There was no way in hell Severus had just given Sirius a blowjob. Hell would have to freeze over for even the faintest possibility to occur. And even still, with hell as a barren Iceland, Severus Snape would have never looked twice at Sirius. It would never had happed. It should never have happened.

His cock cruelly proved him otherwise.

"What the fuck?" he shouted, turning to face the person in bed. He struggled to grasp what had just happened, and the lust pounding inside of him didn't help. "What the fuck was that?"

Severus Snape peered up at him. He slowly liked his lips, and Sirius felt dizzy.

"I need to know," Sirius muttered weakly, unable to tear himself from Severus's mouth.

Severus Snape continued to peer up at him, his eyes dark and guarded. His body betrayed no movement. "I'm not finished," he drawled, his eyes redirecting towards Sirius's groin. Sirius's knees went weak, and he cursed himself. He desperately wanted to fall back in bed and let Severus proceed, but through sheer will power, he resisted.

"No," he whispered. "I can't. This is wrong."

A cruel smile graced Severus's face. "Nothing's wrong if you don't want it to be."

"This is."

Severus's countenance remained emotionless as he slowly undid the buttons of his shirt. Sirius watched with a dry mouth. As Severus lifted the shirt from his body revealing impossibly pale skin, Sirius felt like he was going to collapse.

Sirius forced the memory of Severus crying against him into his head, and his want lessened. He needed to think.

Severus didn't allow him anytime as he tilted his head and revealed supple, vulnerable flesh. His hand traced the lines of his chest into his pants, and he began to breathe heavily. He whimpered and looked up at Sirius.

"I want it to be you," he said hoarsely, letting out a small moan. All of Sirius's breath left him, and he stumbled forward. Every thought departed him except for a commanding need to press himself up against the man and do horribly wonderful things to him.

Skin aching, Sirius pulled at his shirt. His fingers got caught on the necklace on his neck, and Sirius almost tore it aside until he remembered. Standing there, shaking, Sirius struggled to organize his thoughts. Almost everything screamed at him to take the man, but as he held the necklace, he was frozen. A small voice of reason urged him to remember the nights, the promises, and Sirius realized with dawning horror that touching Severus right now would ruin everything.

He stumbled backwards, trying to create space. "Stop it," he ordered. Severus stopped, locking eyes with Sirius. "Stop it," Sirius repeated.

"I'm yours," Severus countered, but his voice sounded constrained. "You can do whatever you want to me."

Sirius shook his head. "No, I can't. I can't do that." His resolve strengthened despite the angry clamoring from below.

"Why not?" Severus questioned. Sirius stared at the man.

"I can't do that to you."

Severus sat in silence. His brow furrowed briefly. "I'm not sure I understand. You paid for it."

Sirius stared at him, his mouth agape. The words from Severus's mouth didn't make any sense, but they certainly helped lessen the desire that ran rampant in him.

"What the hell are you talking about?" Sirius muttered, too shocked to say anything else.

Severus starred up at him and worried at his lip. "I'm not sure I understand," he confessed, his hand twisting in the sheet.

Sirius wanted to scream in frustration, but forced himself to calm down. There had to be an explanation for Severus's actions, and acting irrationally would benefit no one. He organized his thoughts, and a question struck him.

"How…" Sirius began, "how old are you?"

“Eighteen,” Severus spat out defensively. It was a lie, but Sirius didn’t know why a thirty-seven year old man would feel the need to spin such a lie. Unless if somehow, his mind had reverted to his eighteen-year old state, and he genuinely believed it the truth. Still, the defensiveness of the statement led Sirius to think differently.

“I’m going to ask again. How old are you?”

Severus’s eyes became guarded, and a scowl creased his face. “Sixteen,” he muttered. His voice infiltrated Sirius like poison.

“Sixteen?” Sirius repeated. His mind whirled. The confession sounded honest enough, but that meant Severus had relapsed into his teenage mind. The thirty-seven year old man had disappeared underneath a sixteen year old, and that sixteen year old was willing to let Sirius fuck him. Sirius had discovered something dark in Severus’s past, and it frightened him.

“Do you know who I am?” Sirius inquired. Severus’s scowl deepened.

“Does it matter?”

“Yes.”

“You’re one of the clients. You paid for me, you get to fuck me. That’s all I know about you,” Severus drawled. His voice held no hint of emotion, even though the statement sent fear burning through Sirius. He desperately hoped it was some fabrication Severus’s mind had generated that he was a…

Someone pounded at the door, and Sirius nearly jumped out of his skin. Every nerve was stretched taught, and he felt heavy with the combination of lust, fear, and concern. However, the door offered a welcome distraction, and Sirius hurried to it.

He cracked it open, shielding Severus and his bottom half. Remus stared back at him alarmed.

“Now’s not a good time,” Sirius stared, before Remus interrupted him.

“Dumbledore’s called an emergency Order meeting. Everyone’s in the kitchen. You need to get down there.”

Sirius was tempted to punch the wall. Of course, of all fucking nights, there had to be an emergency. He couldn’t leave Severus, but at the same time, he couldn’t forego the meeting.

“Everything okay?” Remus asked, trying to peer around Sirius. Sirius nodded quickly.

“You caught me at a bad time. Give me fifteen minutes.” He winked, and Remus rolled his eyes.

“Hurry down when you’re done.” Remus sighed at Sirius’s cheeky smile, and turned away. Sirius slammed the door shut, breathing heavily. He spun around, unsure of what to do. However, his mind blanked as hands dug into his hips and pushed him hard against the wall. He groaned in a mixture of pain and pleasure.

“I’m not sure what game you’re playing at,” Severus whispered in Sirius’s ear, sending shivers down his spine. Severus leaned forward and nipped at Sirius’s ear. “But I always finish what I start.”

Sirius's hands pressed against the warm flesh of the other's man chest, but he couldn't tell if he was pushing him away or pulling him closer. Severus smirked, and Sirius's knees went weak.

"Can't…" he forced out. Severus tilted his head.

"Can't what?"

"Can't do this to you."

Severus chuckled and placed kisses along Sirius's jawline. "You can do whatever you want to me," he stated low and seductive.

Sirius felt all of his self-resolve eroding away like sand in a storm. His skin caught aflame.

Severus continued kissing Sirius's neck, and at one point, he bit down, forcing Sirius to stifle a moan. He licked at the pain briefly, before starting to leave a trail of open, hot kisses down Sirius's chest. He paused halfway and wrapped his mouth around Sirius's nipple. He teased it, and Sirius felt his knees actually give as he slumped against the wall. He groaned at the sensation, and desire flooded his brain.

He felt Severus smile victoriously, but before he could get all the way down, Sirius reached out a grasped his hair. He would debase himself, succumb completely to Severus's touch, but he would not allow Severus to kneel before him.

He yanked upwards at the hair, and Severus complied. His hands remained firmly entrenched on Sirius's pelvis, forcing Sirius to shift his hips to indicate his intention. Severus immediately picked up on it and wrapped one hand around Sirius's aching erection. He began stroking languorously and Sirius whined at the subtle pressure. He tried to move against Severus, but he firmly held down Sirius's hips and prevented any extraneous movement.

Sirius gasped, yanking Severus's toward him. One arm threw itself around Severus's shoulder and draped over his back. The other wrapped itself around Severus's waist and tightened the embrace so their bare chests heaved against one another. Severus buried his face into the crook of Sirius's neck and kissed sloppily.

The light pressure and slow strikes were driving Sirius mad, and he struggled fruitlessly against Severus's hold. Just when Sirius thought he wouldn't be able to handle it anymore, Severus increased the pressure and quickened the strokes. Sirius cried out, throwing his head back against the wall. His mouth agape, he stared unseeingly at the ceiling.

"Faster," he choked out, and Severus complied. His hand sent busts of pleasure searing through Sirius and the coil of heat inside his stomach tightened. The delicious friction consumed Sirius's mind.

Severus increased his pace once again, and Sirius buried into Severus's shoulder. He bit down at the juncture where the neck met his shoulder as he tried to stifle the noisy sounds. The moment suspended itself, but then, Sirius felt the crashing of an orgasm beating against him. Severus must have noticed, because he bit down hard on Sirius's neck, and Sirius forfeited any attempt to delay the inevitable. He gave himself over the bliss, shuddering against Severus. He saw bright light against his eyelids, and his mind flourished in the pleasure.

The sensation eventually drifted away, and Sirius nearly collapsed against Severus. His whole body felt heavy, but lightness darted across his skin, leaving him as a contradiction. His body ached for Severus's touch but the hazy afterglow had descended upon him, and he sighed.

Before he could collect his thoughts, Severus had started pulling Sirius to the bed. Alarm disrupted Sirius. Once he was in bed, they was no telling what he would do to Severus. The same Severus who thought he was sixteen years old. The same Severus who didn't recognize him or sold his body. He couldn't let that happen.

With one fluid motion, Sirius pushed Severus against the wall. He gasped in surprise as Sirius once again closed the distance and brought his hand down to the man's cock. Drawing on his memory, Sirius began to stroke steadily. He pulled Severus's head down to his shoulder.

Replicating Severus's movements, he began slow but picked up the pace. The other man curled into him, and his hands scrabbled against Sirius's back and clutching at his hair. He emitted sighs and soft moans, sending a heady feeling coursing through Sirius.

He quickened the pace again, and now Severus whimpered. The man was close, and Sirius knew it. With a few strong strokes, Severus suddenly cried out as he orgasmed. His nails dug into Sirius's back, and Sirius winced slightly at the scratches. After a moment, Severus relaxed against Sirius. They held each other, and Sirius luxuriated in the sensation of the other man pressed tightly against him. '

And then horror crashed into him. He abruptly pulled himself away, scrambling to find space. His breathing became erratic, he could hear his heartbeat, and fuck, his mind was moving so fast he could barely keep up. Everything had happened so fast, he couldn't make sense of it but the horrible itchiness had come back and he wanted nothing more than to peel his skin off to escape it.

His knees gave out and he crumpled to the floor. He dug his hands into his hair and pulled, hoping the pain could cut through the confusion and panic. He wanted to scream, do something, but he couldn't move. Weights pushed against him in every direction and the air had disappeared from his lungs.

He dug his palms into his eyelids, desperate to ride the overwhelming panic out. He tried to remember if he had managed before, but all he could think of was the coldness that would settle into his bones. The coldness that sunk deep inside him and stilled his mind until he could think of nothing and no one. He would become a shell of himself.

He didn't want that to happen again, but he had no control over the terror. It swept him away by its sheer force. He could only hope it wouldn't get any worse.

Terror continued to course through him, but luckily, it didn't appear that the Coldness would make an appearance. Instead, he felt himself regaining moments of clarity as he felt his heartrate slow. He breathing slowly eased up, and he gasped for air. He lay on the floor as the panic subsided and he returned to his shattered senses.

When he felt stable enough, he pushed himself up. He sat, focusing on his breathing. Thoughts continued to scurry though his mind like beetles, and it took him some more time before he could form cognizant thoughts.

First, the events of the night terrified him. He could feel a distant darkness rearing up inside of him and he didn't have any idea how he should handle it with Severus. The man had fucked him while thinking he was a sixteen year old prostitute. And Sirius had let it happen and had liked it but oh, it was so wrong. And so, so bad. And he would give anything to have had it never happen.

And what was he supposed to say to Severus? Sorry I had sex with you when you were mentally unstable? Sorry I took advantage of you? Sorry that I…

Sorry I fucked you without your consent? How could Sirius pretend that this wasn't rape? That he hadn't violated Severus without any consent?

His mind stuttered around that terrible world and he felt sick, but he wouldn't lie to himself. He…He had never thought…

Pounding on the door broke through this thoughts and he jerked up.

"Shit," he hissed. He had forgotten about Remus and the Order, but how he could go out there and confront them?

"Sirius, if you don't open up in the next five seconds, I'm coming in," Remus called out. Sirius winced at the harshness of Remus's tone.

He pulled himself to his feet and glanced at the pale figure huddling on the bed. Severus, still shirtless, had pulled himself into a tight ball and wrapped his arms tightly around his body. He looked like he was shaking.

Sirius could barely stand the sight (*he had done this to him)* but alarm struck at the thought of Severus walking down to the kitchen and into the Order meeting as this agonized teenager. Sirius couldn't let it happen, so calling out to Remus that he would be a few seconds, he hurried to the bed.

"You will not leave this room, understand? I'll be back, but you will not and cannot leave," he hissed, trying to sound firm and in control. He was relieved when Severus muttered out a yes. It made him feel sick to his stomach, but he had no other choice.

He quickly ran his hand through his hair and attempted to hide any indication of what had just happened. He didn't know how successful he was, but it didn't matter because he had to get to Remus before Remus got to him.

Shoving the recent events into the crevices of his mind, he made it to the door and slipped out. Remus was standing there, and he looked pissed.

"What the fuck, Sirius? I tell you there's an emergency Order meeting, and you take thirty more minutes to do the fuck knows what? We've been waiting for you."

Sirius winced. "I'm sorry Remus, I just got caught up in something I…I'm really sorry."

"What, your pornos? Seriously, Sirius. Start acting like an adult."

"I…you're right. I'm sorry." There was nothing else he could say. He feeble attempts at an apology didn't appear to lessen Remus's anger, and Sirius could feel shame puddling in his stomach.

"That doesn't cut it any longer." Before Sirius could respond, Remus turned away and started heading down the stairs. Sirius followed even if he wanted nothing more than to ram himself into a wall and never get up again. Shame and guilt and fear and hatred clawed inside him, and he hoped the meeting went fast so he could drink himself into a stupor.

When he entered the kitchen, he was met with the Order sitting and staring at him. He avoided their gazes and took an empty seat next to Remus. Remus still radiated anger, his body tense. It was the usual group tonight -- Moody, Shacklebolt, Fletcher who always creeped Sirius out, Tonks with vibrant blue hair, Minerva, Flitwick, and Molly and Arthur. With his hand crossed in front of him, Dumbledore sat at the head of the table.

Sirius tried to focus instead on Albus who sat at the head of the table and stared quizzically at Sirius. He blinked and looked away.

"Took you long enough," Moody growled, his arms crossed.

"I'm sorry about that," Sirius apologized, staring at the table. He swallowed thickly, guilt and shame curdling in his stomach.

"Mind telling us why you made us wait so long?" Moody continued, his voice scathing.

Sirius almost let out a bitter laugh. If only they knew…but no, they could never know. He had to play it off. He would have to keep Remus believing that Sirius was just jerking off like an irresponsible teenage boy, even though he wanted to prove himself as better.

Sirius searched for words to convey this sentiment without sounding sleazy, but Remus cut him off.

"He was being Sirius, okay," Remus snapped. Sirius winced. "It doesn't matter anymore, so let's just move on. Are we waiting for anyone else?"

"Even though you were late, I'm glad you could join us, Sirius," Dumbledore began, staring intensely at Sirius. His eyes conveyed an emphatic understanding, making Sirius wanted to laugh at the irony. Dumbledore probably thought Sirius and Severus were sharing a heart to heart moment, instead of Sirius fucking raping the other. It made him sick.

Dumbledore paused a moment, glancing around the table. "It looks like we are still waiting for Severus. I suppose I can brief him tomorrow. He may be busy."

Shacklebolt shifted. "You really think you should be telling him this information? If it so sensitive?"

"Yes." Dumbledore responded shortly.

"You're far too trusting, Albus. For all we know, he could be kneeling to Voldemort as we speak," Moody cut in.

"Alastor, you know my thoughts on this subject. Tonight is not the night to repeat this conversation."

Moody just shrugged.

"If there's nothing else we're waiting for, Albus, would you mind telling us what the problem is?" Minerva asked.

"It's come to my attention that Voldemort has plans to seize control of a dangerous weapon, one that could decide the fate of the war."

"Shit," Tonks muttered.

"Indeed. The weapon itself is a prophecy delivered 14 years ago that revolves around Voldemort. With that knowledge, he would be well equipped to win the war."

"So we can't let him get it," Tonks continued.

"No. We cannot." With that, Dumbledore launched into an extensive description of the situation and plan to guard the prophecy. Sirius initially paid attention but his mind kept drifting

back to *that* and he couldn't maintain focus. And even if he could, there was nothing he could do anyway.

The meeting dragged on, and Sirius faded in and out of the discussion. Everyone else threw in ideas and appeared animated and focused. Sirius wished he could join in, but he just couldn't. It was like his mind was flapping in the wind – sometimes he could maintain focus while a quick breeze would ruin his attention.

He caught Dumbledore glancing over at him, appearing concerned. He bloody well should be.

The meeting was nearing around an hour, and Sirius knew he needed to quickly find an excuse to leave. For all he knew, Severus was shaking with fear in his bed. He didn't think he could look the man in the eye ever again, but he had to do something else about this situation.

He searched for an excuse that wouldn't result in everyone hating him, but before he could find one, something much worse happened. Something Sirius had been fearing the entire meeting.

The door opened and in walked Severus Snape.

Sirius had his back to the door, but he knew instantly who it was. Panic surged through him. He had to get Severus out of here. He shot up and turned around. His eyes landed on the man and he faltered. He would never be able to redeem himself for tonight, and the thought physically hurt.

He pushed it aside. He had to get Severus out of this room before he said anything that could reveal his mental state. Sirius had promised to protect the secrets they shared, so he owed it to Severus.

"Don't you dare say anything," Sirius hissed, trying to properly convey contempt. He needed a reason…oh, of course, he could always use Harry. "I heard about what you did to Harry, and we need to have a long talk, comprende?" He stormed over to Severus, well aware he was making a scene.

He threw open the door, and grabbed Severus's arm. He didn't want to touch him, but he had to get him to leave. And if it was physical, it could mean an excuse for them to fight outside.

He stared to pull the man to the door, but Severus stood firm.

"Don't touch me, Black," Severus hissed, and Sirius immediately withdrew his hand. *Fuck* he thought. This wasn't good.

"We need to talk," Sirius tried again. He tried to make eye contact but Severus averted his gaze.

"In the middle of an emergency Order meeting? I thought you would have your priorities straight, but it looks like you're still the ignorant bully you always were." Severus's tone was scathing, and Sirius winced. This…this wasn't what he expected. He knew he deserved Severus's hate; he just hadn't expected to hurt him so much.

"I…" Sirius began. He tried to summon malice and contempt to color his words, but all he could feel was desperation and shame.

"Get out of my way, Black," Severus hissed. Sirius stood helplessly.

“Severus, Sirius, please,” Albus interjected. “Calm down the both of you. There’s no need for such tension.”

Severus’s countenance twisted at the words and he let out a short, bitter laugh. “Really, Albus. There’s no need for this tension? You don’t understand any of this, old man.”

“Watch what you’re saying, boy,” Moody growled. Severus laughed dismissively, and finally, his gaze flickered over to Sirius.

“You’re no better than any of them,” Severus stated, and Sirius winced.

“I’m sorry,” Sirius whimpered. “I didn’t mean for that to happen. I’m so sorry.”

“You didn’t mean for it to happen? Don’t lie to me, Black.” His eyes flashed with contempt.

“I’m not,” he whispered. “I would do anything for that to have not happened, and I’m so sorry it did. You deserve better than that.”

Severus took a step closer, a new wariness entering his eyes. Sirius tried to swallow.

“What are you talking about, Black?”

“What are you talking about?” he shot back before he could think of his words.

“What do you think I’m talking about? You finally achieved what you wanted from the start, and you’re sorry for it?” Severus growled. “What, did you want me running back to you?”

Sirius stared at the man, aghast. “You…I never…shit, you think I planned this.”

“You expect me to believe you didn’t? You waited until I was incapable of…and now you expect me to believe any differently?”

“Shit, Snape. Just stop for a moment, please.”

“I don’t recall you stopping,” he whispered, low enough so only Sirius could hear.

Sirius winced. “God fucking dammit Snape. I’m still trying to understand what the fuck just happened too, so don’t spring this shit on me.”

“Severus, Sirius,” Albus stated steely, diverting their attention from each other. “You need to clear out this misunderstanding. And you need to do it without disturbing a high profile Order meeting. So please think what would be your best course of action.”

“I have nothing more to say to him,” Severus began. “I apologize for interrupting the meeting.”

“Like fuck’s sake, you don’t.”

“Black” Severus sighed, “Just because you showed your true colors, doesn’t mean you need to continue acting like a petulant child.”

Anger surged within him, and Sirius did what he did best when he got angry – act like a stubborn mule who refused to give up a fight.

“Oh, fuck off, Snape. You think I wanted any of that to happen? Fuck no. Shit happened,

and you put me in a situation where I didn't know what the fuck to do. So I fucked up, okay? I did something I shouldn't have done, but I tried to stop it. And sure, that doesn't mean shit at the end of the day, but what happened, Snape, was bad for both of us. Really fucking bad. Full blow panic attack bad, so don't you dare try to put all the blame on me." Sirius's voice kept on rising, and before he knew it, he was shouting.

"Put the blame on me?" Snape exclaimed. "You pathetic excuse for a man, you fucking coward. You can't hide from what you done, not anymore."

"You were fucking sixteen!" Sirius screamed, and oh god, he had lost it. He couldn't control himself and it felt like everything was falling apart within me. He wanted it to end and the anger was his only solace.

Snape froze. "What did you say?"

"You were sixteen," Sirius heaved. "And I didn't know what else to do."

"I…" Snape began, looking uncomfortable. "Are you sure about that?"

Sirius nodded, the fight suddenly leaving him. He felt empty and cold. "Yes, that's what you told me."

"But…"

"I'm too tired to do this anymore, Snape. I can't change what happened."

Severus stood silently, staring intensely at Sirius. Sirius didn't bother meeting his gaze. Instead, he leaned back onto his chair. Exhaustion gripped at him, and a sudden urge to cry came upon him. He wanted to be alone.

He turned to look at the rest of the table and sighed. "I'm sorry about this. I didn't mean to distract from the meeting."

Remus lay his hand on Sirius's arm. "Hey, it's okay. I don't think we realized this had been bothering you. We're here to help."

He was on the verge of a breakdown, but he managed to keep himself together. "Snape came to me when he was injured a few days ago, and during that time, we recounted some of our past. It didn't go that well, and things got out of hand, and now there's this. So that's what happened, and again, I'm sorry it had to come to this."

Albus shook his head. "It's okay, Sirius. Please go get some rest. The morning will be brighter."

Sirius nodded, and brushing past Severus, he left the room. He couldn't go back to his room, especially not this soon, so he turned to Regalus's door and entered. The bed was old and dust lingered in the corners of the room. Sirius didn't care, though, and he headed straight to the bed. He curled up into himself and finally let himself cry.

Exquisite

Behind every exquisite thing that existed, there was something tragic.

The Picture of Dorian Gray, Oscar Wilde

Severus hated being the center of attention. For as long as he could remember, that position meant danger, whether it be the Marauders or the Dark Lord. It made no difference; if people paid attention to him, he had failed.

With the room's focus directed on him, he knew tonight had gone terribly wrong. And it had, even if his memory blurred around the edges. It happened after his headaches sometimes, and he usually put no stock in it. Tonight, though, he needed to remember.

He took a seat before anyone could comment, skirting away from everyone's gazes. He couldn't go back to Sirius, not yet, but he didn't want to be alone. It always so much worse when he was alone.

"Severus," Albus began.

"Yes?" he inquired softly.

"You can leave if it would be more convenient. I can fill you in tomorrow."

He shook his head. "It's fine. I don't mind staying."

"Well, do you mind telling us what exactly just happened?" Moody interrupted.

"I believe Black explained it succinctly."

Moody snorted.

"Alastor," Albus stated, "we've had enough of that for tonight."

"I agree," Molly chipped in. "We need to focus on the business at hand. What exactly are we going to do?"

Severus glanced over at her. He sat directly next to her, and in a display of kindness, she had reached underneath the table and gently grasped his hand. Her touch comforted so he let it remain.

Albus nodded grimly. "Thank you, Molly. Here's what I had thought of so far. Please speak up with any suggestions." For the next hour or so, he launched into a description of his plan, for which there were frequent interruptions and discussions. Severus maintained a façade of focus, but his mind remained distant.

His mind cycled through the events of the last few hours—or at least what he thought were the events. He remembered a headache and Sirius getting him into bed. And then darkness and sleep, but when he woke up…

That's what he couldn't understand.

He didn't know where Sirius was now, and he couldn't shake his concern. At the same time, if his interpretation of the events were true, he would never want to see Sirius again.

The confusion and fear and shame tore at him, but he sat silently, waiting for the meeting to end.

Eventually, there was nothing left to say. Molly gently squeezed Severus's hand, before getting up and flooing away with Arthur. People took their leave, and even though Severus was usually the first one gone, he made no attempts to move.

Then it was him, Albus and Remus, and no one seemed intent on moving. This was shaping up to be an uncomfortable conversation, but Severus couldn't get himself to leave. If he left, he would be alone. On a night like this, that would be a severe mistake.

"Severus, my dear boy, what's wrong?" Albus asked softly. He didn't seem to have any problems with Remus remaining, so Severus didn't let it bother him.

"I don't know. I don't know what happened," he choked out. Remus stood and got him a glass of water, of which he took a grateful sip.

"That's okay, my dear boy. Just do your best."

"We…" he tried, but the words failed him.

"You went to him, right? After I saw you?" Albus prompted, and Severus nodded quickly.

"Yeah, I did."

A look of surprise crossed Remus's face, but he remained silent.

"I fell asleep with him, but when I woke up, he…Albus, I think I need to see him."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, yes. Because I might be wrong about what happened, and if I am, I need to see him."

"I can go get him, Albus," Remus said.

"That might be best, but please Severus, what happened between the two of you?" Albus's voice had deepened with an unexpected sadness.

"He…I think he sexually assaulted me" Severus forced out, the words burning his tongue. The sheer nerve of it shocked him; he never confessed secrets like this, but the night was still too fresh and the feelings too vivid. It no longer became something he could hide away. He had been freshly wounded and the blood still seeped out.

Remus let out a startled gasp. The furrows on Albus's face deepened, and Severus cursed himself. He didn't need to cause Albus any more pain, but goddammit, Sirius had fucked up his emotions in a way he didn't know yet how to handle.

"Do you still want to see him?"

"I don't know what else to do," he whispered.

"Then, Remus, could you please get him for us?"

"I…sure," he managed. Pain flitted across his face. "I'm sorry, Severus. I didn't think Sirius would do something like this."

Severus tilted his head in acknowledgment, and Remus quickly left the room. Albus stood up and moved to the chair next to him.

"I never meant for something like this to happen, my dear boy. I am so sorry it had come to this."

"It's not your fault."

"Still, Severus. If I had known…"

Severus shook his head weakly. "Please don't blame yourself for this."

"Thank you for telling me. It's brave of you, and I'm proud of who you are."

"Please don't say that."

"Severus, there's nothing else I would want to say."

The door burst open, and Sirius charged in. Remus closely followed. He faltered when he saw Severus.

"Sirius, if you have nothing to say that could resolve this situation, I want you to leave now," Albus stated coldly, and Sirius winced.

"No, I need to understand what happened."

"I think we know what happened," Remus cut in, his tone scathing.

"No, no, there's too much I don't know. Please, Sev. I need to understand."

"You…I think you sexually assaulted me." The words were no easier the second time.

Sirius startled, but pulled a chair out and sat down across from Severus.

"How?" he stated bluntly. "How did I assault you?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Remus exclaimed. "Are you so idiotic that you don't know the difference-"

"Be quiet, Remus," Sirius commanded. "Sev, how did I assault you?"

"I remember waking up, Black. You somehow pushed me against the wall where you made me give you a hand job before you returned the favor. But at no point, was I in control of my actions or remember giving consent. Everything was blurry and faint, which leads me to conclude you drugged and raped me. Do you need anything else?"

"Sirius, please be careful about what you say," Albus warned. Sirius swallowed thickly.

"Do you remember saying anything to me? Anything at all?"

Severus hesitated. "No, I don't. But you…you said I was sixteen. What did you mean, Black? And don't you dare lie to me."

Sirius glanced around the room. “Is it okay if they hear?” he asked, gesturing towards Albus and Remus.

“Say it, Black,” Severus conceded.

“Okay, okay. You know how you had that headache?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I got you into bed and I sat down next to you. You fell asleep at some point, and so did I. But you woke me up, and I’m not sure when, but you were,” he coughed, “you were touching me. Like sexually. And I didn’t realize at first, but when I did, I freaked out. Okay? I freaked out, Sev, and I got out of bed as fast as I could, but something was wrong with you. There was something off, and I didn’t know what.”

“Why would you think that?” Albus interrupted.

“Because… fuck, I’m sorry Sev. You kept on trying to get me back into bed with you. And I almost did, but I stopped myself. And god, I didn’t know what to do, but I could feel something was wrong, so I asked you how old you were. Because you seemed different, and I didn’t know why.”

“And I said I was sixteen?” Severus’s asked, his voice low.

Sirius shook his head. “You said you were eighteen, but I could tell you were lying. And so I asked again because I didn’t know why you would lie about that. And that’s when you said you were sixteen.”

Severus had paled considerably.

“And I still didn’t know what that meant, so I asked if you knew me, and you said no, you didn’t, but that I was one of your…”

“Yes, I see. And then we…?”

Sirius nodded, eyes downcast. “Yeah, I’m sorry. I tried to stop it from happening, but I just couldn’t.”

“It’s okay, Sirius,” Severus consoled, and Sirius’s gaze shot up.

“No, it’s really not. I took advantage of you, Sev. That’s never okay.”

“I don’t think I left you with much choice, did I?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Yes, it does. You can’t blame yourself.”

Sirius let out a bitter laugh. “Of course I fucking can.”

“You can’t,” Severus stressed, “And remember what we promised? That we would try?”

“Yeah,” he admitted.

“As long as you tried, that’s a lot more than I can say for others, okay? You were in a situation with no easy way out, Sirius, but you did more than I could have asked for.”

He scoffed. “Still doesn’t change it.”

“No? Then do whatever you want but know that I don’t blame you for it and I forgive you. And that I don’t want this to end it.”

“You still want to see me? After that?”

“Yes.”

“But, Sev…”

“No, Sirius. This isn’t up for debate.”

“Fine,” Sirius conceded. “But I’m still sorry.”

“I’m sorry,” Remus interjected, “but what exactly is happening?”

Sirius cast his gaze over at Remus and let out a dejected chuckle. “It’s nothing really. Just something to kill some time,” he lied, glancing over at Severus. Severus stared back at him, understanding filtering through his expression.

“Sirius…”

“My dear boys, I am very much on the same page as Remus,” Albus interrupted. “And while you have no obligation to tell us, I would greatly appreciate it.”

Sirius shifted uncomfortably. “Yeah, well-“

“It is our belief,” Severus began, “that this information could pose a threat if the Dark Lord ever caught wind of it, either from legilmency or any other means. So keeping it as secretive as possible is preferred.”

Sirius ducked his head in shame. “I didn’t mean to involve you, Remus.”

“However, I have faith in keeping this secret within this room, and as such, Sirius, if you would like to tell, Remus you can,” Snape continue, ignoring Sirius’s comment. “But Remus, please understand that no one else can know.”

“Of course,” Remus replied.

“Thank you, Sev,” Sirius said, gratitude filling his voice. He cleared his throat and launched into a filtered explanation. Severus appreciated him leaving out the more personal details, but he provided enough of an explanation that the new turn in their relationship was clearly defined. Sirius reached the prior few hours in his narrative and he paused.

Albus looked at him closely. “And this led you to the situation that you were fighting over at the Order meeting.”

Sirius nodded. “I’m sorry for causing such a scene, but I needed to get Sev out of the room.”

“Why?” Albus cut in. Severus paled.

“Huh? Well, I was worried for him and wanted to make sure he was okay.”

“Severus, I don’t mean to make this uncomfortable, but I recall Sirius saying you said you

were sixteen. What did you mean by that?"

"Well, he acted like he was much younger," Sirius answered. "And he didn't recognize me. He said…"

"He said what?"

"I'm not sure it's my place to say."

"Severus?"

"It was nothing, Albus."

"Then why would sixteen year old you feel the need to…?"

"I don't know!" Severus snapped, his voice rising. His breath quickened in pace and his hands twisted together.

"Hey, hey, hey," Sirius consoled, reaching across the table to grasp Severus's hands. "It's okay. Whatever it was, it's okay."

Severus let out a bitter laugh. "You think it's that easy?"

"No."

The response took Severus aback and he stared back at Sirius. Albus and Remus looked at them with concern.

"No one is going to make you say something you don't want. I don't know what happened either, but I'm here for you. And we'll figure it out together."

Severus choked at the words, his brow crumpling.

"I didn't mean to press you, Severus," Albus stated gently. "It came from a place of concern, but I'm glad Sirius is here for you. I'll let the two of you go back to your room if you would like." Remus nodded in agreement.

"Thank you," Sirius responded. Severus remained unresponsive. Remus placed a gentle hand on Sirius's shoulder and it seemed to ease a weight on his shoulders.

It was time to get Severus back into the bedroom, so Sirius slowly stood up and ushered the silent Severus upstairs. He didn't put up any resistance, and they were soon back in the room that Sirius wanted to expunge from his memories. He couldn't come to terms over what had happened.

He brought the man over to the bed and sat down. After a moment, he lay down, drawing Severus close to him. The man shuddered, apparently lost in a reverie of memory.

Exhaustion tugged at Sirius, but he didn't relent. He still didn't understand everything that had happened, especially in reference to what Sev had said. By the time morning came around, it may be too late. Severus could shut down again, and he would never find out what happened. Even if he had to prey on Sev's apparent weakness, he couldn't bear not understanding the full extent of the events of tonight.

With a deep breath, he drew Severus even closer. "Hey," he whispered, "what's wrong?"

Severus sharply drew in a breath but remained silent.

“I won’t make you say anything, but do you think you could do it for me? You said you were sixteen, Sev, and I’m scared to know what you meant.”

“Then why are you asking?” Severus growled. His voice lacked malice, so Sirius continued.

“Because you also said I was a client, Sev. And I don’t know what that means either.”

“It means exactly what you think it means,” he hissed.

“From what I can gather, it means that I paid to have sex with you. But I don’t understand…”

“What is there for you to understand?”

“Why does a teenager think he needs to sell himself?” Sirius asked bluntly, too tired and curious to care about tact. Severus stilled beside him.

“It’s not something I can say.”

“Please…”

Severus remained silent next to him, and the minutes drew themselves out. Sirius could feel his eyelids drooping, and too tired to press on, he almost allowed himself to succumb to sleep. Severus’s voice jerked him awake.

“It was my father,” Severus admitted, so quiet that Sirius almost missed it.

“Your father? He was the one who…?” Sirius asked, his stomach sinking.

“No, he never touched me.”

“But then…?

“He was the one who sold me.”

“Sold you?”

“Yes,” Severus replied, curling in tighter to Sirius. He drew in a deep breath, and then the words seemed to fall out of him like a cascade of water.

“When I was young, my family was very poor,” he began. Sirius held onto every word. “My mother worked, but my father mostly drank. When my mother died, we lost the only source of income.”

‘My father tried to get jobs, but he couldn’t keep them. He needed money to drink, and he got bad when he didn’t have any,” he whimpered, and Sirius instinctively pulled him closer.

“Father got more and more desperate. One day,” Severus’s voice cracked, and he shuddered underneath Sirius’s grasp. “One day, I was sitting in my room, and a man I didn’t recognize came upstairs. I tried to get him to leave, but he forced me onto my bed, and he tore off my clothes, and he,” he said, the words flying out of his mouth in a fevered confession. Agony laced his voice. “He raped me.”

“I was fifteen, and I was a…I had never done it before then. I hadn’t even kissed anyone, and when he did kiss me…it tasted like tobacco and salt, and I started gagging.” A quiet sob cut

through the air, and Sirius lifted a hand to wipe the tears trailing down Severus's face. He could feel his own throat close up and tears wet his cheek. "I'll never forget it either. The way it tasted. I couldn't get it out of my mouth for weeks."

"He gave Father several hundred for the honor." Another quiet sob. "After that, it started off infrequently. A client every two weeks or so. I don't know where Father found them, but they hated themselves for wanting to fuck a man, or they hated everyone and wanted to fuck someone, or sometimes, they were just lonely. It didn't matter, because as long as they paid, they could do whatever they wanted to me."

"The next summer, when I was sixteen, it got worse. At least a client every few days, if not multiple. I would lie in my room, and afterward, Father made me clean up, and then he sent me back up because some other lowlife he found wanted his turn. I did everything," he cried quietly. "And I got good at it. I would play the roles they wanted. I would say whatever they wanted me to say. I knew when to moan, when to scream, when to cry."

"I lost everything to him. I… can't even begin to describe." Sobs racked his body. "I only ever wanted it to stop. I would have given anything for it to have stopped."

Sirius pressed wet kisses against Sev's face. Their tears intermixed, and Sirius wanted nothing more than to wash it all away.

"You can't tell anyone, please," he begged.

"I won't," Sirius promised, aghast.

"I'm sorry this happened," Severus sobbed. "I thought I was better than this."

"Shhh," Sirius whispered. "I'm here. I'm here now."

"Don't leave me. Please don't leave me."

"Never," Sirius promised and he could feel that word striking deep within his soul.

Severus continued to cry beside him, and Sirius held him close and pressed soft, earnest kisses against the man's tortured face. At some point, they both succumbed to sleep, remaining closely intertwined with one another.

AN: I won't be posting for the next month or so because I'll be traveling and won't have much access to my computer. However, I will be continuing this story in February (I have about 5 more chapters written and am in the process or writing more). On that note, I'll see all of you in the 2019!

Aftermath

I don't think I could love you so much if you had nothing to complain of and nothing to regret.

Doctor Zhivago, Boris Pasternak

Severus woke up slowly, distracted by a faint pulsing in his temples. The headache had run its course, and it appeared the worst was over. He was grateful, and he allowed himself to sink deeper into Sirius's heat before letting his eyes close again.

Sirius shifted beside him, and Severus furrowed his brow. Something lingered on the edge of his perception, but he couldn't nail it down. He would get like this sometimes after the migraines. The past nights would seem fuzzy, indistinct, but he ascribed it to the pain. And in the state he was last night, he doubted the capability of his mental prowess. It was probably minor, probably something Sirius had said to him.

Speaking of Sirius, the man beside him shifted and yawned. He reached up to rub his face, and Severus scowled when the arm bumped into him.

"Good morning, Black," Severus drawled. "Sleep well?"

Sirius's gaze shifted towards him, and the look made Severus pause.

"How are you feeling?" Sirius inquired, his voice rough and untested.

Severus sat up and climbed out of bed. "As well as can be expected. The migraine has largely passed, thankfully."

"Yeah," Sirius exhaled. "And about everything else?"

Severus stared at him quizzically. Maybe this is what had faded into the hazy horizon of his mind. "Everything else?" he repeated dryly.

Sirius looked at him blankly. "Yes."

Severus shrugged. "It is what it is," he decided on. He had no idea what Sirius was talking about, and it was much too early for him to try to deal with a tearful confrontation of something he couldn't remember.

"It is what it is," Sirius repeated flatly. Severus nodded before turning to the bathroom.

Before he could shut the door fully, Sirius had leaped out of the bed and wedged his hand between the door and the doorframe. Severus stepped back startled. "What is it?" he hissed.

"Tell me what happened last night."

Severus stared back silently. "Why?"

"Because for some reason, I don't think you know. Or you wouldn't be acting so damn casual about it."

“Maybe I don’t want to talk about it.”

Sirius shook his head. “Too bad. I need to hear you say it.”

“How about you fuck off, Black?” Severus scowled. “Or do you need to jump on me so early in the morning?”

Sirius let out a frustrated growl. “Why is nothing easy with you?” he muttered. “What happened last night, it’s not something you can ignore.”

“You underestimate me.”

Something dark and heated overcame Sirius’s eyes and before Severus could flinch, the man had leaned forward and pressed a hard kiss on his mouth. It lasted a mere second, over before it began, but it caused Severus to jump back and stare at Sirius aghast.

He raised a hand to his lips, uncertain of whether he imagined it.

“We’re not ignoring it,” Sirius growled, and Severus felt a flash of heat.

Fuck he thought. He didn’t know how he had managed to forget to this, because surely, this is what must have happened last night. A kiss exchanged, maybe more, he couldn’t remember. And to his dismay, he found himself quite pleased.

“I have to brew some potions,” Severus muttered thickly, staring at the door. Sirius sighed and conceded.

“I’m not ignoring this,” he repeated, “and we have a long talk ahead of us tonight.”

Severus stared at him coolly, trying to hide his racing heartbeat. Sirius exited and Severus shut the door behind him, drawing in breaths of cool air. He cursed his memory; he didn’t understand how he could have blanked on something so significant.

His hands shaking and mind racing, he quickly got ready and apparated to Hogwarts. He couldn’t confront the man again, not now. He had tonight for that.

The day passed quickly. He made progress with his potions, finished reading some new research, and for the most part, had a fairly good day. Sirius still haunted him, but he managed to push it aside for the time being.

At dinner, however, Albus had cast him the oddest look. Concern, confusion, and pain had all mingled together, and Severus struggled to understand the motivation behind it. Albus still didn’t know about the Dark Lord’s treatment, and he had cleared the air with Sirius. There was no conceivable reason for Albus to be especially concerned over Severus’s wellbeing. Well, except for whatever had happened last night.

The few times Severus had experienced a migraine to such an extent, he had been alone or in a situation where it made no difference of what happened. The first migraine of this severity had been when he was fifteen after *that* happened. Then a few times when he was sixteen, worsened by the events of the summer. The headaches would make an appearance when he became a Death Eater. The Dark Lord always seemed especially intrigued in Severus whenever he felt like his head was going to split in half due to the pain. At that point, Severus was heavily confused and in so much pain, he had no time to delve on it.

After the first war, the headaches would come sporadically, usually minor and

inconsequential. He brushed it off to the stress. Every so often, a monster of a headache would appear and his mind would bend a little too much, but he managed. There was usually nothing to remember, anyway, so it didn't matter if he woke up hazy. But last night…last night was different. He needed to remember, but he couldn't. That frightened him, and he didn't know if he should tell Sirius or not.

He hated uncertainty; it froze him to the bone.

The night rushed up to meet him like an old lover's embrace. Summoning his courage, Severus gripped the necklace and felt twisted away until he landed in Grimmauld Palace.

Sirius was in his chair, reading glasses pushed up this nose and a thick book placed firmly in his lap. The title read *Doctor Zhivago.* He closed the book and put it aside.

"Severus," he murmured.

"Don't say we need to talk, because I know we do," Severus snapped.

"I was going to ask if you wanted a drink."

Severus nodded curtly, taking the seat next to Sirius. He folded his hands in his lap.

"How are you feeling?" Sirius inquired, pouring them both a glass of whiskey.

"Fine."

"Glad to hear that," he replied, taking a sip of his drink. "About last night," he paused, contemplating something. "That was the first time I had kissed someone since before Azkaban. I hadn't meant too, but you said the contact helps with the headache."

Severus kept a smooth countenance. He didn't know why a headache riddled version of himself thought it a good idea for Sirius to kiss him, but he could play it off. Claim it was an unrequired schoolboy crush, if necessary, or a simple desire for contact. It didn't explain the kiss this morning, but at least last night made more sense.

"I apologize for putting you in an uncomfortable situation. Rest be assured, the pain was considerable and I wasn't thinking straight."

"And did it help?" Sirius asked eagerly, and Severus twisted his hands. He was dancing in a minefield and he couldn't shake the feeling that Sirius knew something more.

"Yes, I sometimes find human contact to help with certain types of pain. Not all of course, but I seem to associate contact with relief from the pain." The lie slipped easily from his lips.

"I only kissed you once; was that okay?" Sirius asked, his voice hollow.

Severus shot him a puzzled glance. "Why would it not be? It's not like we possess such feelings towards one another."

Sirius fell silent, and his breath caught in his throat. He drowned the rest of his whiskey. He stood up, shaking slightly. "It's not like we have those feelings," he muttered darkly, taking Severus by surprise. "I need to talk to Remus, okay? I need to sort through something."

"Fine, Black."

"Please stay, Sev. I'll be back, but I have to sort through some stuff in my head."

Severus nodded, and Sirius headed towards the door.

"Sirius-"Severus began, unsure of what he wanted to say. "This morning, you…I didn't mind it," he finished weakly.

Sirius let out a bitter laugh. "I didn't either," he said quickly before exiting the room and leaving Severus alone with his thoughts.

Sirius ran out of the room, his mind racing. He had talked to Remus earlier today about Severus's odd behavior this morning, but until now, he pretended it was just a fluke. Remus told him to make sure either way, so Sirius devised a test and Severus had failed miserably.

He didn't know how to respond. He desperately needed Remus.

He barged into the kitchen and Remus and Tonks, sitting closely and talking intently. Sirius paused; looking back, the signs had been there. It only took till now to realize it.

"Remus, mind if we talk? Sorry Tonks," Sirius said in a mad rush of words.

Remus nodded, "Yeah sure. Can you give us a minute?" Tonks nodded, and Remus left with Sirius.

They stood in the hallway, and Sirius leaned against the wall to steady himself.

"He doesn't remember," he muttered weakly. Remus's brow furrowed.

"At all?"

"The headache, but nothing past that. Told him we kissed once after he told me the contact helps with the pain, and he agreed. Played along like it was nothing unusual. But nothing, nothing else."

Remus drew in a shaky breath. "Oh god, Sirius."

"I don't know what to do, Moony. I can't pretend last night didn't happen."

"No, no, of course not. It's not fair to you or him."

"But I don't know how to tell him. I can't-" Sirius broke off.

Remus nodded in understanding and lay a hand on Sirius's shoulder. "Is there any way you think you could jog the memory?"

"I'm not sure…"

"Albus might be able to help too."

"Yeah, he might," Sirius agreed. He ran a hand across his face. "Why can't something be easy for once? Why does everything have to be so fucking hard?"

Remus sighed. "I don't know, Pads." Sirius let out a bitter sigh of air. "Is he still upstairs?"

"Yeah, I couldn't stand being in the room with him right now. Not like this. And I still don't know what to fucking do."

Remus thought for a moment. “Tell him, Pads.”

“What?”

"You have to tell him. You’re only two options are to tell him or to not tell him. It’s going to eat you alive if you don’t, and its something he deserves to know.”

Sirius stared at him wide-eyed.

“I’m sure Albus would let you borrow his pensive, too, if you think that would be easier.”

Sirius nodded. “You’re right, Moony. I can’t pretend everything’s fine. I’ll talk to him. Fuck.” He winced. “He’s not going to be happy about this.”

“Do you think he’ll leave you if you tell him?” Remus asked, concerned. From what he could tell, Severus was having a huge effect on Sirius, more than Sirius would want to admit himself. He didn’t want it to end and for Sirius to slip back into the broken, bitter man he was before.

Sirius let out a broken laugh. “I sure hope not. He’s…it hasn’t all been smooth sailing so far, Remus. We’ve had a fair share of disagreements, but he’s always come back so far. And if he wasn’t willing to end it last night then it might still be okay.

“I’m just worried about what it’ll mean to him.” He shut his eyes, “He told me some stuff last night, Remus. Deeply, painfully personal stuff. I’m going to have to tear that all up again, and I’m worried about him.”

Remus froze, the words catching him off guard. He had only been aware of Sirius’s newfound relationship with Snape for less than twenty-four hours, but if he didn’t know any better…

“You care for him,” Remus stated bluntly, and Sirius blinked surprised.

“Moony…”

“It’s okay if you do, Sirius.”

Sirius cleared his throat. “Everything is moving so fast, Moony. I don’t want to hurt him, and I don’t want to be hurt,” he confessed.

“Hey, I know. I know all too well. But Sirius, if you care for him, if you really care for him, you should let him know. Not now, if you don’t want, but I know you Sirius, and this won’t be something you can bury.”

“Same goes for you,” Sirius shot back, and Remus stood abashed.

“That obvious, huh?”

Sirius shot him a modest smile. “I’m happy for you. Just don’t fuck it up.”

Remus laughed. “She’ll kill me if I do.”

“Yeah, Sev would murder me, reanimate my corpse, and then kill me again just for the hell of it if I ever fucked with him.”

“Sev?” he asked wirily.

“Fits him better than Snivellious now but still pisses him off.”

Remus laughed. Sirius smiled brighter before it faded off his face.

“I’ve got to go talk to him. Figure this all out.”

“Tell me what happens after. I want to help you however I can.”

“Thank you, Moony,” Sirius responded before disappearing back upstairs.

Remus stared at the disappearing figure before returning to the kitchen and his conversation with Tonks.

Sirius hurried upstairs, threw open the door, and was greeted with an empty room.

“Fuck,” he muttered. He had no idea why Severus had left – perhaps the Dark Lord had called or he was starting to remember the events of the previous note. He walked into the room, sinking into the chair. A hastily scribbled noted on the table in front of him grabbed his attention.

Dark Lord called. Will return when I can.

Sirius sighed. At least the note cleared up his confusion, but fear punctured his consciousness. He didn’t what shape Severus would return to him tonight, but he hoped for the man’s sake, he was okay. The corresponding surge of fear and panic confirmed what Sirius was grudgingly starting to admit.

Sure, Severus Snape was a greasy bastard, and Sirius hadn’t expected to fall in love with the man. And maybe he wasn’t. Maybe he was confused and the intense proximity was resulting in the heightened emotions. Or maybe Severus had managed to force his way into Sirius’s creaky heart and rekindle something Sirius had long thought extinct. Fuck, whatever it was, he knew James would be rolling in his grave at the thought of it.

Power

Power is in tearing human minds to pieces and putting them together again in new shapes of your own choosing.

1984, George Orwell

"Severus," the word coiled around the room, and he flinched. "You have been quiet tonight."

He attempted to suppress the surge of panic that suddenly coursed through him. He glanced up and gleaming red eyes met his gaze.

A look of irritation crossed the face. "You have nothing to say to that?"

"I hadn't realized, my lord. I apologize," he replied, maintaining the eye contact. It allowed him to pretend he had some form of control.

"You are distracted, my servant."

Severus hesitated, but he knew better to deny it. "Yes, my lord."

"Hmm," the Dark Lord hummed, clearly waiting for Severus to elaborate. Severus thought rapidly over what he wanted to say. It couldn't be too unrealistic or pleasing, and it needed to save him from the wrath of the Dark Lord.

"I had an altercation with the dog, Sirius Black." Hatred twisted the words, and Severus allowed rage to mildly contort his features. Not enough to look fake, but enough to be believable. Bellatrix hissed out of the corner of Severus's vision.

A faint frown appeared on the Dark Lord's face, and Severus could feel something freeze inside of him.

"And you believe this is more deserving of attention than me?" A cruelness had entered his voice, and the ground became unsteady below Severus's feet.

"No, my lord."

"Yet it consumes your mind." The Dark Lord tsked. "Irresponsible, Severus."

The red eyes bore into Severus's and he fought against the urge to break eye contact. He had to maintain it or else things would become much worse.

"I apologize, my lord. It angers me that I am fixated on it, for he is not deserving of attention."

"No," the Dark Lord considered Severus for a second. Time slowed and Severus prayed it had been enough to appease him. If not…

Severus let out a sigh of relief when the Dark Lord turned his attention toward Lucius. As long as he was no longer the center of attention, he may be able to escape tonight unscathed. The meeting continued, and Severus made sure to appear attentive. The Dark Lord fluctuated between

madness, and he lost track of time.

Finally, after what could have been hours, the Dark Lord finally dismissed them. Severus made to the door, but the cold, high voice stopped him.

“Not you, Severus. Tonight you remain with me.”

“Yes, my lord,” he managed as fear took root in his stomach. He tried to steady his breathing and mentally prepare himself for what was to come. A private audience with the Dark Lord was rarely pleasant.

The other Death Eaters filtered out, and finally, the two men were left. The Dark Lord closed the gap between them and pressed a frigid hand against Severus’s cheek.

“My dear servant, whatever should I do with you?” he murmured softly like they were lovers. His hand gently stroked Severus’s cheek.

Severus deigned to respond, trying to not recoil from the touch. The Dark Lord noticed his discomfort and laughed.

“Tell me, Severus. Why do you not like my touch? Many others would be honored.”

“I…” Severus faltered, cursing himself.

“Do I remind you of the men your father let touch you?” the Dark Lord crooned, and Severus nearly fell over in shock. His eyes grew wide and he stared at the other man, aghast.

“How?” he muttered weakly. The fear filtered through his shock.

“You told me yourself.” The Dark Lord smiled wistfully. “You weren’t in your best state of mind, so I’m not surprised you don’t remember.”

Severus swallowed thickly. The Dark Lord’s fingers stroked gently through his hair, and he resisted the urge to run.

“Does Dumbledore know?” A malicious glint took hold in the red eyes.

Severus shook his head. “No, I’ve never told him.”

“Why? Do you think he would be disgusted?”

Severus paused, the silence acting as an answer, and the Dark Lord laughed again, high and piercing.

“Oh, Severus. I have half a mind to rape you right now and give you something that would surely disgust him.” His grin was wild and cruel, and Severus couldn’t breathe. The Dark Lord took another step in, closing the distance between them. His lips lingered a few centimeters away from Severus’s ear.

Severus’s eyes shut from the terror of it all, and he searched for a way to escape this. He wanted to be back with Sirius. He wanted to be safe.

The Dark Lord bit harshly at Severus’s earlobe. He pressed a string of kissed against Severus’s jawline and then pressed a hard, cold kiss onto Severus’s mouth. His tongue pressed against the other man’s lips, forcing entrance. Panic surged inside Severus, and he scrambled to find a place in his mind where he could block everything out. He would have to shut himself down

if this was to happen.

The Dark Lord was an angry, greedy kisser, and Severus tasted blood.

Eventually, the Dark Lord pulled away. He regarded the man in front of him.

“Not tonight,” he said after a minute. “Tonight, I have something else planned for the two of us.”

Severus couldn’t stop the wave of relief from washing over him until he remembered that he was far from free. He didn’t know what the Dark Lord had planned for him, but it seemed like it would be much more elaborate than a simple Cruciatius curse. The thought froze him to his core and he started to fortify his mental defense. Pain was familiar; whatever the Dark Lord did, he would survive.

In the space of a breath, Severus had been pushed back into a chair and black ropes had coiled forward and wrapped tightly against his body. His breath hitched. The Dark Lord regarded him impassively. He turned away, walking behind Severus and out of his line of vision.

Severus couldn’t track his movements, so instead he focused on controlling his breathing. He counted one breath after another in a desperate attempt to control his panic. It wasn’t working.

After the span of a few minutes, the Dark Lord reappeared in his line of sight. Severus frantically glanced over him, trying to note any differences, and his gaze halted on the needle the Dark Lord held in his right hand. It was filled with a viscous, pale white liquid – one Severus couldn’t identify.

The Dark Lord smiled when Severus flinched. “Oh, Severus,” he scolded, his voice unhinged yet completely controlled. “In retrospect, you should have asked for me to rape you. You would have at least had some pleasure at the end of it. With this, however…” he gestured towards the needle. His smile widened when he saw Severus tremble with fear.

“I’ve been perfecting it for the past few weeks. A pet project to stave off the boredom. I’ve used it on a few others, but I am truly curious to see how it will affect you. You are, after all, highly responsive.”

“What’s in it?” Severus choked out. The Dark Lord let his hand drift through the bound man’s hair. The fear from him was palatable, and the Dark Lord relished in it.

“Don’t be ridiculous. That would ruin the surprise. No, much better if you experience it yourself.” The Dark Lord brought the needle to Severus’s left forearm, letting the needle hover over the Dark Mark. His gripped the man’s wrist and noted the man’s erratic heart rate. He loved stripping control from Severus, loved making him taste fear.

The aligned the needle with the vein and paused for a moment. He peered deep into Severus’s terrified eyes. “How fitting,” he whispered, “the Potion Master brought to his knees by what he loves so dearly.”

He plunged the needle into the man’s arm. He watched his muscles lock and a tremor travel through his body. It took six seconds for the man to start screaming. He considered the trial a success.

Severus didn’t know how it happened, but he ended up a shivering mess on the floor of Sirius’s bedroom. He felt arms wrap around him. He tried to speak, but he threw up instead, and then everything faded to black. He welcomed it.

He didn’t know how long he remained hidden in the blackness. It was safe there, no one could touch him. He lingered there for as long as he could until the world pulled him rudely out. He gasped as memories of pain danced across his skin.

It took a few more minutes for him to grow aware of his surroundings. He could tell he was in a bed and Sirius was lying next to him. That fact alone sent waves of relief crashing over him, and he almost burst out in sobs.

Sirius shifted next to him, and Severus pulled him as tightly as he could against him. He ended up draped half-way across Sirius’s chest with a leg sunk between Sirius’s, but he needed the comfort, the security. He needed to feel safe and protected and this was the closest he could get after last night.

Sirius’s steady breathing lulled him into a twilight and he eagerly gave himself over to sleep. He never wanted to wake up again, if he could avoid it.

AN: I recently finished the book *A Little Life* by Hanya Yanighara, and it destroyed me. It has some similarities to this story (deeply traumatic childhood experiences and a beautiful romance with two people trying to overcome that tramua) but is 1000x times better. It's what I wish I could write if I had the time and talent. So if you've been enjoying this story, do yourself a favor and check out *A Little Life*. It will emotionally destroy you, but it's so beautifully written that you won't care.

Shiver

But what was happiness but an extravagance, an impossible state to maintain, partly because it was so difficult to articulate?

A Little Life, Hanya Yanagihara

Sirius didn't know how long he had slept, but when he awoke, Severus Snape lay across him. He had curled tightly into Sirius, his black hair falling across Sirius's neck.

The warmth was intoxicating, and Sirius brought a hand to lay gently across Severus's back. The man remained fast asleep, so Sirius let it linger there.

He didn't even realize when he started rubbing small circles into the man's back or when his other hand had drifted into the locks of Severus's hair, but it felt right. He didn't want to fight it, so he didn't.

As he lay there, an intense desire overcame him to touch Severus skin to skin. He wanted to feel the warmth of his skin under his fingertips. He didn't want to make a mistake like the night before, but the temptation grew too great, and he brought his hand down to slip under the end of Severus's shirt.

His fingertips grazed the skin of the man's lower back, and he pressed his palm down gently. The man's skin was warm and surprisingly soft, and his fingertips buzzed at the sensation. He would be an idiot not to admit Severus had a hold over him. He wanted to press himself firmly against Severus and never let go. He never wanted him to show up shaking and incomprehensible in the depths of his pain again. Was that too much to ask?

As Sirius drifted in his thoughts, he saw Severus's eyes flicker open and his hands froze. He was crossing a line here and was embarrassed to be caught. He had no idea where Severus stood in all of it, and he shouldn't have assumed otherwise.

"Don't stop," the other man growled, and Sirius almost went dizzy with emotions. *Fuck* he thought. He was a thirty-eight-year-old man, not a hormonal teenager.

Sirius resumed his movements, his fingertips caressing Severus's lower back and the other hand sifting through the man's hair. It was intimate – too intimate, and Sirius tried to shrug away the embarrassment. It felt good, though. He couldn't admit otherwise.

Severus fell silent and they remained like that for several minutes. His leg was nestled between Sirius's, and he almost wished it wasn't. Everything was too close, too soft, too warm.

Lying there, Sirius could feel his imagination rearing up and he let gave himself over to it. It was so easy to pretend that Severus Snape cared for him as Sirius did. He could pretend there was no war, no Voldemort to cause Severus pain. Azkaban became a distant memory on the horizon. He could find peace like this. It was intoxicating.

Despite Sirius's best efforts, reality broke in. He could smell the hot, sticky smell of dried sweat on Severus and the man desperately needed a shower. Then of course, there was the whole question of what had happened last night. And he couldn't forget that fact that he still needed to

talk to Severus about the night before that one. Oh, and he might need to discuss his burgeoning feelings for the man.

Sighing, he slowly shifted the other man off him. “Sorry, got to piss,” he muttered as he stood up. A faint frown graced Severus’s face.

Sirius walked to the bathroom, did his business, and returned to the bedroom. Severus replaced him in the bathroom, and Sirius heard the sound of the shower as he paced. Thoughts stumbled through his mind; it was too early for this shit.

After about ten minutes, the shower shut off and Severus emerged. He was neatly dressed, all evidence of the previous night washed away. He regarded Sirius coolly and Sirius could feel his heartbeat turn erratic. This was bad.

Severus glanced at the clock. “I have to prepare for class. I’ll see you later tonight.”

Sirius nodded, not trusting himself to speak.

Severus stood expectantly, and Sirius knew he needed to say something. There was too much rushing through his head. There was no much he needed to tell Severus, and it sent panic curling through him.

Severus took a step closer. “Sirius, are you okay?”

Sirius gave a jerky nod. “I’m fine”

“Rule number 1,” Severus chided gently, and Sirius cursed himself.

“Okay, you got me.”

“And…?”

“And what?”

“What’s bothering you?” Severus asked, seemingly exasperated.

“Nothing much. Just have to sort through some stuff, you know?”

“Some stuff about me?” Severus remained composed, and Sirius cursed him for that. He felt like he would fall apart at the seams at any ill-timed gesture or word.

“No. Yes. I don’t know.”

“That’s not an answer.”

Sirius could feel a panic attack encroaching, and he needed this over. He wasn’t capable of handling himself now. He needed Severus gone.

“I’ll tell you tonight, ok? Don’t you have potions you need to worry about?”

Severus stared hard at Sirius, before reaching up to the necklace and apparating away.

“Fuck!” Sirius exclaimed, and he wondered if it was too early to start drinking.

Through the windows, one could catch the last glimpse of a dying sunset. The sky was alight with color, hues of purple and blue and red splashed across a cosmic canvas. It was stunning, but as Sirius paced Dumbledore's office, he didn't pay it any attention.

Neither did Albus, who watched Sirius attentively.

Tension radiated from the man. His movements were jerky, yet predatory. Low growls would emit from his throat.

Albus had brewed him a cup of tea to calm him down, but it lay untouched. He felt concern for the man, especially after what Sirius had told him earlier.

Two days ago, Albus had been disgusted and enraged by the fact that Sirius had abused Severus. He couldn't help but blame himself for putting the two in the situation, and he felt enormous pity for Severus. He already inflicted enough harm on Severus by sending him to the Dark Lord that he couldn't cope with the fact that he had inflicted more by sending him to Sirius.

Then, of course, Sirius had explained his side, and suddenly, it was no longer black and white. Severus had forgiven him, and the circumstances brought up more questions than answers. The fact that Severus had said he was sixteen unsettled Albus.

This afternoon, Sirius had contacted him and asked if he could use the pensive. Albus inquired why and Sirius's response had puzzled and concerned him. Apparently, Severus had no recollection of that night, and Sirius, in good conscience, could not pretend it didn't happen.

Albus still wasn't sure what to think of that night. Sirius had essentially sexually assaulted a person, yet it did not appear intentional. Moreover, the events of the night were so murky and Sirius appeared genuinely sorry for it that Albus didn't know enough to draw conclusions.

Looking at Sirius now, Albus couldn't help but see how much Severus was affecting him. It appeared that over the past two months they had transformed from enemies to something more. Albus smiled to himself. If he didn't know any better, they looked like they genuinely cared for one another. As he said, the line between love and hate was exceedingly thin…

The door opened, disrupting Albus's thoughts. Severus strolled in, irritation crossing his face.

"What is it, Albus?" he began but froze when he saw Sirius. Sirius, himself, had ceased pacing and appeared extremely uncomfortable and tense. "What are you doing here?" Severus hissed, and Sirius flinched.

"Severus," Albus interjected. "Sirius required the use of my pensive."

"I told you we would talk tonight," Severus scowled. Sirius ran a hand through his hair.

"I know. But I don't think I have it in me to tell you."

"What are you talking about?"

Sirius drew in a shaky breath. "There's a memory I need to show you. I don't think you remember it, and that's the problem."

Severus fell silent. "Is this about two nights ago?" he whispered. Albus looked at him concerned. He hadn't been aware that Severus had any memory problems, and he prayed that Voldemort didn't either.

Sirius nodded. “Yeah. It is.”

Severus crossed his arms. His brow furrowed.

“Have you had memory problems before?” Albus asked gently. Severus rarely opened up to him like this, but Sirius appeared to have a pull on the man.

“I don’t see how it’s any of your business,” Severus snapped.

“Severus,” Sirius placated. His tone appeared to open something up in Severus, and Albus watched fascinated.

“I…sometimes when I have headaches like that.”

“How often do you have those headaches?” Albus inquired.

“Depends. I haven’t had one for a while, but it’s usually once or twice a year. More if I’m under stress.”

“And you had memory problems then?”

“Well, I’m in a lot of fucking pain, so it can be hard for me to remember sometimes,” Severus snarled.

“And you don’t remember two nights ago?”

Severus regarded them both warily. “I don’t see why this is important.”

Sirius stepped forward. “Something happened then, Severus.”

Severus stared at him with distrust in his eyes. “What are you trying to tell me?”

“It’s in the pensive. I won’t be able to…”

“Fine.” Severus walked over to the pensive. The silky white memory swirled on top. Albus stared at him grimly. Severus would not react well to the contents, and Albus considered brewing another cup of tea.

“Severus,” Sirius began. He stared imploringly at the man. “I’m sorry. I really am. For all of it. But I had to tell you. I couldn’t live with it if you didn’t know. And I’m here for you. I’m always here for you.”

Concern shot against Severus’s face before he plunged it into the pensive.

Within the span of the next fifteen minutes, Albus felt like days had passed. For Sirius, it looked like it had been years. A terrible resignation had settled across his features and he looked ready to fall over at the smallest provocation.

At last, Severus had emerged from the pensive. He leaned against the wall, and haunting exhaustion appeared to drag at his figure. His face had crumpled in a way that Albus recognized. It occurred when Severus felt at his lowest, his most defeated.

“Do you…” Severus choked out. “Do you mind leaving me alone for a minute?”

“Severus, I’m not sure if that would best,” Albus responded. Severus drew in a shaky breath, his gaze firmly fixed on the floor. The wall seemed to support all his weight.

“Severus,” Sirius began.

“Don’t.” Severus glanced up desperately at the ceiling, agony firmly entrenched on his face. Sirius fell silent. “I can’t be here right now. I have to go.”

He lurched to the door, his steps shaky and unsure. As he moved past Sirius, the man shot out his hand and grabbed Severus by the wrist. He stopped in his tracks, and Sirius gently rubbed circles on the skin.

“Stay with me, okay?” Sirius asked, his voice low. Severus cast a wild glance at him.

“You couldn’t possibly want that.”

“I do,” Sirius reaffirmed.

Severus shook his head disparagingly. “Why can’t you see me for who I am?”

“Severus, I do. You’re the bravest person I’ve ever met.”

“How can you say that? Now that you know?”

“It’s the truth, Sev.”

“No, it’s not.” The self-hatred was evident.

Albus silently watched the scene unfold.

“What you told me doesn’t make you any less.”

“It should. What happened to me –“ Severus broke off and brought a hand up to his mouth. “Oh god, Sirius. Oh god.”

“What is it? Sev?”

Albus watched with dawning horror.

“Why did you tell me this?” The man’s tone caught Sirius off guard. Something felt off…

“I couldn’t pretend it didn’t happen. It wasn’t fair to you or me.”

“You shouldn’t have told me,” Severus whispered. “I don’t want to know this.”

“I know. It was selfish of me.”

“No, you don’t understand,” Severus muttered and he glanced desperately up at the ceiling. “Why don’t you hate me?”

“Why don’t I…? I told you already. You…you’re incredible, Sev. I couldn’t hate you even if I wanted too.”

“But you should,” Severus whimpered. “Oh god,” he repeated. A realization appeared to dawn on him. “I didn’t remember.” Something terrible hid in his voice. “I never remembered after those headaches.”

What’s wrong?” Sirius asked gently. “What is it?”

To Albus’s horror, a laugh bubbled out of Severus. It was a terrible sound, broken and

heaving. He seemed to laugh because any other alternative was too horrible to consider.

“Jesus, Severus, what is it?”

“It wasn’t just them, was it?”

“I don’t know what you mean,” Sirius said, panicking.

“The Dark Lord,” Severus forced out between each broken laugh. “Never understood why he was always interested me when I had those headaches. Guess it makes sense now.” Laughter racked his body, and Sirius struggled to absorb what Severus was suggesting. Albus felt the world close in on him.

“Oh fuck. Fuck. Fuck.”

“He was going to do it last night, you know?” Severus whispered, his voice taking on a conspiring note. “I thought he said it just to frighten me. He already thought it was funny how I flinched at his touch. He kissed me too. It was terrible. Not like how you’ve kissed me.” Severus thought for a moment. “He’ll rape me though. I don’t know when, but he will. I mean, I guess he already has. But he’ll make sure I remember this time.” He laughed again, unhinged. His eyes darted back and forth, and his shoulders shook with the effort of it all.

“Sev…”

“I’ll be okay if he does,” Severus decided. “I can leave in my mind. There’s a safe space in there and I can hide in it if things get especially bad. I would always go to my pond when I was young. But now, I think I’ll go to you.”

Sirius felt his heart break cleanly in half.

“You can always come to me, Severus. Always.”

Severus heaved against him. He threw himself into Sirius’s arms and clutched tightly.

“Please don’t leave me.”

“I won’t. I’m not.”

“Everyone leaves me,” Severus whimpered. “Please, Sirius, promise me.”

“I promise, Sev. I promise with all my heart.”

“You’re lying,” Severus accused, malice overtaking his voice.

“I’m not.”

“You know now. You know how dirty I am. How disgusting. How worthless. And if you don’t realize it now, you will soon. And then you’ll break that promise. As you should.”

“No, no,” Sirius murmured. “That’s not true.”

Severus gulped in a breath. “Yes, it is.” His tone radically shifted from desperate and earnest to cold and aloof, and Sirius jolted at the rapid change. He had forgotten how much control Severus had over the expression of his emotions because for the most part, Sirius could see past it.

Severus pulled back from Sirius and ran a hand over his face. Something fractured lay in

his gaze.

Sirius stood mute as Severus turned Albus.

“I’m sorry you had to witness this,” he spoke softly. “It was a moment of weakness. Please don’t worry about my wellbeing. I can handle myself.”

Albus stood and crossed the room over to Severus. He flinched almost imperceptibly.

“Severus, don’t apologize for this. This…” Albus felt at a loss for words, a feeling he rarely encountered. He didn’t even know where to begin, and he still couldn’t get over the fact that Severus had said he was sixteen. What did that mean?

“You are not worthless, Severus,” Albus finally decided on. “I see the tremendous worth in you, and so does Sirius. And even if terrible things have happened to you, it makes no difference. I love you like a son, Severus, and nothing will change that.”

Severus stood stricken. He opened his mouth as if to speak, but nothing came out. Instead, Albus drew him into a hug and let the poor man fold himself into him.

They remained like that for a while; Severus pressing himself into Albus and Albus offering as much comfort as he could. Albus’s heart broke for the man, and he berated himself for not paying more attention, for not being more vocal about what Severus meant for him. It had taken his insane plot for Sirius and Severus to find comfort in one another for him to realize.

Eventually, the sun had sunk behind the horizon and the first gleans of stars were appearing in the vast sky when Severus pulled away. He kept his face turned down, his expression hidden.

Sirius, picking up on Severus’s body language, crossed the room. He nodded at Albus before grasping Severus’s hand. The two men apparated away, and Albus was left alone with his whirling thoughts.

AN: Another chapter up! I have about five more chapters to write in this story, so while a little more slow-going, an end is in sight. I've also been working on a Stucky story (Endgame wrecked me), so if you like that pairing, keep an eye out for that. And again, thank you for all your support!

Hope

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hope is the thing with feathers -

That perches in the soul

Emily Dickinson

Severus awoke with a start. He untangled himself from the blankets in one hectic movement and sat on the edge of the bed. Terror lingered in his muscles as he struggled to push past that tearing feeling he always got after the nightmares. He couldn't remember what the nightmare had been about, and for some reason, that frightened him more.

His movements awoke Sirius, and the man shifted sleepily over.

"Hey," he murmured, his eyes half-lidded. He sat up and moved sluggishly next to Severus. "What's wrong?"

"Nightmare," Severus whispered. It was the first one he had with Sirius and that fact unsettled him.

"About last night?"

"Can't remember."

"Oh," Sirius sighed. He draped an arm across Severus's shoulders in an almost half-hug. Severus sat disbelieving. He didn't understand how Sirius could ever want to touch him after finding out about *that.*

They sat in silence for a while until Severus felt composed again.

"You can go back to sleep," Severus said but Sirius made no efforts to move.

"Nah, wanna be with you," he slurred.

"Why?" The word slipped unbidden from Severus's lips and he prayed the other man was too sleepy to pick up on it. He wasn't that lucky.

"Really got to quit it with this self-hating crap."

Severus remained silent.

"Wanna be with you because I need to be with you" Sirius admitted, leaning his head against Severus's shoulder. He exhaled slowly "You slimy bastard don't know what you've done to me." Sleep seemed to tear down any of Sirius's filters, and Severus sat there processing his words.

"Ok."

"Don't get it, do you?" Sirius asked, leaning heavily against Severus.

"I…go back to sleep, Sirius."

"Mm'kay." The man shifted off him and flopped back onto the bed. Within a minute, he was sleeping deeply, almost as if he had never wakened up in the first place. Severus watched him for a long while as he attempted to sort everything in his head out. He felt so lost and confused, and the horror of the past few hours had yet to fully sink in. He didn't understand how Sirius could stand sharing a bed with him after knowing he had been the Dark Lord's…

Severus shook the thought of his head. He had no desire to dwell on it. Instead, he lay back down and pulled himself up to Sirius. He knew it was wrong for him to continue to seek comfort from the man, but he no longer knew if he could survive these nights without him. So, while Sirius still seemed to care for him, he would take any scrap of kindness, any gentle touch. He would press them into his memory and hide them in the space inside his head where he kept everything sacred and dear. They would reside next to the memories of Lily, and the parallel didn't fail to strike him.

However, Lily had never known the full extent, not like Sirius did. She had known his father was an alcoholic, known he was abusive but had never understood the measures his father would take to inflict pain. She knew his mother had died, but now how; he had told her it was a heart attack. And maybe Sirius didn't know it now, but Severus was under no delusions that he could keep it hidden from him. Sirius already knew about *that* which, to Severus was more than enough.

Severus had utilized every skill of his to deceive and lie to prevent Lily from finding out about *that*. The shame and disgust had taken a physical presence, and he did everything he could to hide from it. He could see the dirt caking his skin, even if no one else could, and he was so worried that if Lily knew, she would see it too. If it meant lying to Lily, then so be it.

It turned into more than just lies. His anger and desperation at himself metastasize into anger at the world, anger at Potter, and then anger at her. He grew short with her and secretive and rebuffed any attempt of hers to bridge the gap. He shied from her touch; not because she was muggle born as she had believed, but because he was so fucking dirty and he couldn't stand the thought of leaving some of that filth on her. She would stare at him with betrayal and heartbreak in her eyes, and Severus wanted to kill himself for it. And he tried to. Several times. But something would always go wrong and he would wake up and scream at the crushing pain and hopelessness.

It became so much worse when the hateful word slipped from his lips and she stared at him with a hatred that he knew had been building up for months. He had tried to apologize, but it was too late and too little. He thought about confessing everything to her and salvaging the one relationship in his life that meant anything to him. Cowardice held him back, and before he could work up the nerve, he was back with his father, back to the bed, back to the nightmare of an existence.

After that summer, he became a hollow mockery of himself.

At the end of his sixth year, Lily and Potter started dating. When he saw them together the first time, something shattered deep inside him, deep enough that no one had ever been able to reach it until then. It was all it took, though, for Severus to redouble his efforts with the Dark Lord. He took the mark not long after. He killed his father the following year. He thought it would make things better, but it didn't.

He remained in his twilight of existence until the prophecy and then Lily and July 31st where the hollowness gave way to unadulterated agony.

It took years, but he had pulled himself one step at a time from the edge of the precipice.

He was by no means a happy man, but he was comfortable. He took care of himself, had people he cared for and who appeared to care for him, and had something to dedicate himself too. He could even forget that his childhood had happened at all. It was the best life he could make for himself, and he was proud he had made it so far.

And now he had Sirius.

He was almost too scared to allow himself to hope. He also couldn't shake the terrible feeling that this would all fall to shit and he would end up alone and deeply wounded. Or worse, he would lose Sirius just like he had lost Lily. He wasn't sure if he could survive a second time.

But Sirius wanted to be with him. And upon hearing those words, Severus realized he wanted to be with him in a way he hadn't felt since Lily. Half of him wanted to hide from that realization, from the pain it would certainly bring. His other half, which he accredited to Lily, told him to overcome that fear. It told him to listen to his cobwebbed heart and put his trust in the man snoring beside him.

He thought it over for a very long time. When morning came, he finally had an answer.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the shorter chapter! The next one is quite something, and even though I thought about adding it to this one, I thought it would end up being too much.

I also wrote a Steve/Bucky fanfiction for all the Marvel fans which I am in the process of publishing if you want to check that out! It got me back into writing (I cycle through spending my evenings reading, writing, or watching Netflix) so I've been working on Sleepless and bringing it slowly and surely to an end (don't worry, there are still many chapters to go and many more painful confessions :)

Bare

Chapter Notes

This chapter is a doozy. It contains explicit mentions of child abuse, drug abuse, and sexual abuse. It is not pleasant, so if you would rather not read, please message me and I'll send a quick summary.

Please enjoy, if that is possible with something like this.

Now the waves they drag you down
Carry you to broken ground
Though I'll find you in the sand
Wipe you clean with dirty hands

Foals, Spanish Sahara

"You awake?" Sirius asked quietly. It was about seven in the morning and the sunlight beamed through the window.

Severus hummed in response, and Sirius shifted uneasily next to him.

"Stop worrying," Severus commanded lightly. "I remember this time."

"Oh," Sirius breathed, at loss of what to say.

"You did the right thing."

"I…I'm not sure about that," Sirius replied, guilt striking his voice.

"Oh?"

"Well, it's what they say, isn't it? Ignorance is bliss? And I fucking ruined that for you."

"You're talking about the…"

Sirius drew in a shaky breath. "Yeah. It's my fault you know now."

Severus shifted into a sitting position. "You're thinking too much about this," he chastised. Sirius shook his head. Guilt curled inside of him and he couldn't stand to meet the other man's gaze.

"Maybe. But still, Sev, I keep on making everything worse." His hand clenched at the sheet.

"Why do you say that?"

Sirius stared at him aghast. "I'm the one who raped you," he stuttered over the word, and

Severus winced. “I was the one who made you realize what Voldemort did to you. All this after I promised I was going to make up for what I did to you. So yeah, I’ve been making everything worse.” Sirius shot him a wild stare. “Voldemort…if I found out he did that to me…how are you so composed?”

Severus stared at him, and Sirius wanted to wilt away and turn to dust. What kind of question was that? At least it proved his point that he fucked everything up.

“I wasn’t very composed last night, was I?” Severus stated. He ran a hand across his face. “Sirius, what is done is done. I can’t change anything that has happened, and luckily I can’t remember. The poor boy it happened to – as you can imagine, he was at a point of his life where he felt no possession of his own body. It was no different than anything else than what had happened so far in his life.”

The words baffled Sirius. “But,” he stuttered.

Severus brow furrowed in irritation. “Would you rather have me crying? Have me spend weeks in a deep depression? I’ve spent countless years grappling with everything else that has happened to me, and I won’t, *can’t,* lose that.

“Severus…” Sirius began, but Severus cut him off with a curt shake of his head.

“It’s…I would prefer not to think so much on it. And please don’t feel bad. The good you have done for me has far outweighed any of these…unpleasant situations.”

“Well, I’m still sorry,” Sirius apologized. The pressure had lessened from his chest and a faint glow warmed his chest at the words. He blinked, trying to dispel it.

“And I accept your apology. Now can we move past it? I’m rather hungry.”

“I can go grab something downstairs,” Sirius answered. He moved to get out of bed but paused. He still had so many other questions, and he wasn’t sure he could survive a day with them bouncing around his head.

“What?” Severus scowled.

Sirius shook his head. “You’re going to hate me for it.”

“Consider it already done. Now say what you want to say.”

“The other stuff you told me...”

“Yes?”

Sirius gestured, trying to impart his thoughts. “You…I want to,” he sucked in a breath and without thinking, rushed the words out. “I have so many questions and I might go crazy if I have to spend all day with them in my head.”

Severus remained silent. Sirius could feel his muscles locking up. The rejection and embarrassment were almost too much him to take.

“Can we at least have breakfast first?”

Relief crashed over Sirius, quickly replaced by trepidation about the upcoming conversation. Set in his decision, he shook off his hesitations.

“Oatmeal with fruit okay? I’ve been perfecting my presentation.”

Severus nodded, and Sirius hurried downstairs, eager to craft his the strawberries, bananas, and blueberries into a perfect bowl of oatmeal.

As Severus sat on the bed waiting for breakfast, he was almost grateful that Sirius had pulled the stunt last night. With this, the Dark Lord held one less thing over Severus. He shuddered at the thought that the Dark Lord personally sharing those memories with him.

Undoubtedly, it had felt like hell, and he had cracked more than he had in years, but in a way, it had been freeing. He had survived and would survive again if the Dark Lord ever hurt him in that manner. It weakened the Dark Lord’s hold on him, and it made him feel giddy. He was sick of feeling powerless and lost in the Dark Lord’s grip, and this gave him a bitter victory over one of his master’s perverted games.

He had Sirius to thank, a sentiment that he still struggled to coincide with his prior opinion of the man. His kindness and honesty had floored Severus and left him vulnerable. Sirius could have easily taken advantage of Severus by pretending nothing had happened. He could have done *it* again if he wanted to. But he didn’t.

Severus wanted to curl inside himself at the mere thought of his childhood and his father. He had banished those memories to a dark, dusty corner of his mind, never to be touched again. They had remained hidden for nearly two decades, and the fact that he was even contemplating telling Sirius terrified him to his core.

But he was so sick of living in fear, and maybe, just this once, he could rely on the kindness of Sirius to make the pain bearable. He was already in too deep, and if he drowned in it, at least it would be for Sirius.

The door swung open and Sirius waltzed in, carrying two bowls. He set them on the nightstand.

“Voila!” He exclaimed, gesturing at the amalgamation of fruit and nuts. A stupid smile lit up his face, and the absurdity of the whole situation sent Severus into a fit of giggles, which he tried desperately to suppress. Sirius only beamed wider. He propped his hand on his waist and pretended to stroke a fake mustache.

“Az you can zee, zhere iz a beautiful arrangement of zhe fruit and zhe nuts,” Sirius evoked a terrible French accent. “I hope you enjoy ze dish.”

Severus tried to smother his laughter, but the god awful French accent made it nearly impossible. He felt his face crinkle in laughter and Sirius joined in.

“Enjoy your fucking oatmeal,” Sirius teased playfully, throwing a spoon at Severus. “It took me twenty years to master this art.”

Severus couldn’t stop the smile spreading across his face. This was all so easy and fun; it would be such a shame when it had to end.

And it did, of course, because Sirius clambered onto the bed, oatmeal firmly in hand. Severus took hold of his own and began to eat.

“Good, right?”

“Surprisingly.”

Sirius stared at him with that stupid smile, and Severus almost reconsidered the decision he made last night.

“So,” Sirius began, the smile fading from his face.

“So,” Severus repeated.

“I’m sure you know by now that I’m a curious, stubborn son of a bitch, and while I would love to let his rest, I think it would drive me up the wall.”

Severus nodded. “You’re already insane enough as is. I would hate to make it any worse.”

“At any point, if you don’t want to talk, you can tell me to shut the fuck up.”

“Are you trying to tempt me?” Severus asked slyly. Sirius half-grimaced, half-grinned. “Go for it, Black.” Severus let his fear melt away from him as he focused solely on the man in front of him.

“Ok. Umm…” Sirius hesitated. “Your mother? What was she like?”

Severus was thrown by the line of questioning for a second. “I thought you wanted to ask about…?”

Sirius shrugged. “Yeah, but if you’re finally opening up to me, I might as use it.”

Severus scowled. “Don’t make me reconsider, Black.”

Sirius’s eyebrows twitched, and Severus relented.

“She was wonderful,” He began. “She took care of me, would tell me all these wonderful stories of Hogwarts. I loved her, and still do.” He felt a stone sink in his stomach. “She would try to shield me from my father and help me when he was bad to me. He abused her, and she wanted to desperately get away, but my father…well, he doped her up. Got her addicted to heroin. She tried to leave with me a few times, but we would always go back to him when she ran out of money and couldn’t get her next hit. He always hit her pretty badly after that, so the fight eventually left her.” A tightness clenched his throat. “She died when I was fourteen. Overdose. I was the one who found her.”

Sirius had paused mid-bite. Severus felt so exposed his skin itched with it. He didn’t want Sirius to say anything, not about this.

“My mom was a fucking bitch.” Sirius finally stated, and Severus stared at him in disbelief. How could this infuriating man know exactly what to do in these situations? “Wanted me to be her perfect Slytherin son, at the complete expense of my wellbeing. Had to look and be perfect, which gave me a pretty bad eating disorder that I only got over in Azkaban. And then, if I wasn’t her perfect son, she would curse me. I was eight when she first crucioed me. All in the name of making me perfect, of course. I hated her, and still do.” He shrugged. “Died when I was in Azkaban. Know you aren’t supposed to feel happy there, but that was the closest I ever got.”

Severus sat silently, his eyes fixed on Sirius’s. He took another bite of his oatmeal and laughed uneasily. “Hey, you didn’t expect that I would make you bring up all your childhood

trauma alone?"

"No, I suppose not. Are you okay with it?'

Sirius smiled grimly. "I might not have had as bad as you, but my childhood was far from perfect."

"How do you do that?" Severus asked weakly. His hands skittered against the sheets.

"Hmm? Do what?"

"Make this not as bad."

Sirius looked closely at him. His brow furrowed, and he stared down at the oatmeal. "Not sure, Sev."

Severus coughed uncomfortably. "Anyway," he said, desperately needing to change the subject. "What's your next question?"

"Your father. What was he like?" He spoke towards the oatmeal, and Severus could feel his heart sink with the question. He knew this was coming, but it didn't make it any less difficult.

"My father…" he trailed off. He took a bite of the oatmeal in order to rid his mouth of the bad taste he got every time he thought of the man. "It's not an easy thing to explain."

Sirius nodded sympathetically. He remained silent and let Severus collect his thoughts. Severus sighed. The promise he made to himself entrenched itself in his mind, and he focused on the fragile beating of his heart. *This is for you, Lily* he thought.

"My father was a muggle. He was apparently a pretty famous drummer in some muggle band, which is how my mom met him. They fell in love, and I think they were happy, for a while. Then, I'm not sure what happened, but the other members kicked him out and he turned to alcohol to cope. I was born not long after that."

"I don't remember much from the beginning or when he started beating me. My first memories…" Severus trailed off, biting his lip and glancing around the room.

"I never had enough to eat. I remember the hunger. If he did give me something to eat, it was always leftovers that he would make me eat from the floor like a dog. My mom would sneak me food, but if he found out, he beat her. I would have terrible hunger cramps, and my mom thought I was dying. He would relent then and let me eat more, but he always said he needed to discipline me. Make me strong."

Sirius winced at the words.

Severus continued. "And then, of course, there was the pain. Always, always in pain. I tried to rationalize it at first, what my father did to me. I convinced myself I was what he said he was – a bad kid. If only I was better, if I could just be a good boy for him, then he wouldn't treat me like this."

Severus wrapped his arms around himself. "I didn't even know what he was doing to me was wrong until I was six and saw some boy playing with his father. He didn't have any bruises, and they both seemed happy. I didn't know how to handle that. My mother told me it wasn't my fault and I was the best son she could have asked for. But my father didn't see it like that, and I couldn't understand why he didn't. I still don't…"

"He broke my nose three times before I was eight. That's why," Severus whispered, gesturing towards his nose. "And I lost count over how many times he broke my other bones. Lots of ribs, I know that. He would throw me by my wrist, so that snapped a few times. And then some others," Severus shook his head and struggled to breathe. "If it wasn't for my mom and her magic, I wouldn't have made it."

"He was so bad, Sirius. You can't even begin…and I was so young and helpless. Couldn't do anything to stop him. No matter what I did…"

"He would scream my name and take his belt and beat me into unconsciousness. Sometimes he used a dog chain and that hurt, really hurt. I didn't even know what death was, but I would have wished for it, if I had known," Severus confessed hurried, his eyes wild. Sirius reached out a hand and grasped his hand tightly.

"And then if I cried too loudly or for whatever reason he wanted, he would throw me into the cellar and lock me in there. It was so dark in there, and I would sit huddled against the door because there were *rats.* And the rats would come up and try to crawl on me, but if I screamed, he left me in longer, so I had to sit there and *listen*. Listen to them crawling around me and try to keep them away. But sometimes, sometimes, my father left me in there for so long, I couldn't stay awake," Severus let out a frantic sob. Sirius pushed the oatmeal aside and pulled Severus into his arms. He let the man bury his face into the crook of his neck, feeling wetness against his skin. Sirius had begun crying himself, so he pressed his lips against the top of Severus's head and whispered words of comfort. He didn't know if it brought any solace, but it was all he could do.

In a tortured voice, Severus continued. "He would press my arms against the burning stove if I got in his way. Chain me to the radiator in the winter until I couldn't hold back my screams. He would say terrible things to me about how I was worthless and a waste of space and how I deserved what he did to me, and I believed him for many, many years. He made me into his pet," Severus spat. "In between what he did to me, he would sometimes, very rarely, treat me like an actual son, like someone he could be proud of. I craved that approval, was desperate for it. And that made everything else even worse." Severus broke off, his voice trembling. Sirius held him, waiting for him to continue. He had opened something inside Severus and it wouldn't stop until it was all out.

"When I was seven, I first showed magic. My mom tried to hide it, but eventually, he found out. When he did, he took a knife and he threw me on the floor and stripped off my shirt. I didn't know what he was doing at first, but it wasn't long before I realized. He carved the word "Freak" onto my back. Freak."

His breathing became erratic and he gripped tightly onto Sirius. "You know what happened when I was fifteen. He never touched me himself. I had that small mercy. But he let his friends and anyone else who wanted to pay have their go with me. I couldn't get them all to use condoms, so I got really sick after a while. I should…I should have told you, Sirius. I have potions that take care of it, but if you would rather not…"

Sirius shook his head, muttering a protest. He rubbed gentle circles onto Severus's back and pressed a soft kiss on the top of his head. Severus shuddered but didn't pull away from him.

"Please don't think I didn't want to leave. I would have easily taken to the streets over what happened in that room. But he told me if I ever tried to leave, he would find my bitch of a friend and rape her until she died. That's why I didn't leave. I couldn't bear the thought of anything to happen to Lily, let alone what he promised to do. I would let anything happen to me if it meant she would be safe."

"I know I should have told someone," Severus said, his voice dropping. "But I couldn't. I

didn't know how. So I let it happen."

"I poisoned him when I was eighteen. It was how I proved myself to the Dark Lord. It's the only thing I've done for the Dark Lord that I don't regret." The words choked Severus, and he broke off. He felt like someone had wrung him out and then scraped him with blunt knives, and he couldn't stop the sobs.

Sirius held him closely, whispering kind words. He held tightly onto Sirius to keep himself grounded. Severus could tell he was crying by the way his chest shook, and that made him cry even harder. It was a weakness, a terrible weakness, but he wasn't strong enough to stop it.

They remained like that, Severus awash in memories he had fought against for years and Sirius offering enough comfort to make it bearable. He lost track of time as he focused solely on the warmth of Sirius and let the memories run their course.

It left him bare and exhausted, but with an enormous sense of relief. He was no longer alone with this terrible secret. Sirius knew, and Sirius was good to him, and maybe, just maybe, Sirius could ease his agony. It was a flicker of hope, but more than he had ever had.

The relief made him dizzy but dried his tears. He didn't want to pull away, but he had already relied extensively on Sirius's kindness. He needed to take hold of himself again, so with a pained movement, he moved away and forced his emotions aside.

"You okay?" Sirius asked, and Severus nodded weakly.

"Please don't say anything right now," he muttered, cursing how his voice wavered.

"Okay," Sirius agreed. "I won't."

Severus stared at the man across him, and he had the uncomfortable feeling of his heart swelling and his stomach twisting in knots. He knew exactly what he wanted to do to this man who allowed Severus to bear his soul but not feel pressured or judged. It wouldn't take much for him to do. All he had to do was-

A knock pounded through the silence, breaking the spell.

"Fuck," Sirius muttered. He glanced at the door and then back at Severus.

He leaned forward and drew Severus into a brief hug. "That was brave, Sev," he whispered. "Thank you for telling me."

Severus nodded, the words lightening the pressure on his chest. From anyone else, those words would have made him want to die, but from Sirius, they were genuine and kind, and he couldn't help but value them.

The contact ended before it began, and Sirius rushed to the door. He opened it slightly, and Severus prepared to apparate away.

"Remus," Sirius said. "You're up early."

"Is he..? I'm sorry but this can't wait."

"Yeah, of course. I'll let you in." Sirius moved slowly to allow time for Severus to apparate away if he desired. He didn't, instead running a hand over his face to collect himself. He welcomed the distraction.

Remus walked through the doorway. His face was somber. “Good morning, Severus,” he said. Severus returned the gesture.

“What’s wrong?” Sirius asked, his voice serious.

“It’s Harry.”

“Did something happen to him?” Severus could detect the barely disguised panic in Sirius’s voice.

“A couple of dementors attacked him and his cousin. We’re not sure if they were sent by Voldemort or not. He managed to fend them off, but it’s no longer safe for him to remain there. Moody is picking him up and he’ll be here shortly. The problem is that he used underage magic and the Ministry is going to want to put him on trial. It’ll be a shit show for sure as they’ll use it as a political move.”

“Fuck,” Sirius stated definitively.

Remus nodded. “It could have been a lot worse.”

“Yeah,” Sirius muttered, running a hand along his jaw. “And he’s definitely okay?”

“As far as we know.”

“Does this mean…?”

“He’ll be spending the rest of the summer here, Pads.”

A smile broke across Sirius’s face. “That’s great news. Except for the whole dementor bit and the Ministry. But it will be wonderful to have him here.”

Remus glanced over at Severus. “I bet he’s been talking your ear off about this, huh?”

Severus gave a curt nod. “Yes, it’s been rather annoying.” He stood up, placing the bowl of oatmeal on the nightstand. “For the trial, wouldn’t it be easy to prove self-defense?”

“You would think so, but the Ministry is claiming that there were no dementors in the first place and as such, no need for self-defense.”

“Oh, I see.”

“What?” Sirius asked. “That doesn’t make any sense.”

Severus sighed. “The Ministry should have control of all dementors, so the news of rouge ones doesn’t fit with their narrative. It’ll be much easier for them to paint Potter as a liar, especially with his claims about the Dark Lord.”

“That’s bullshit.”

“Most of the Ministry is.”

Sirius looked concerned. “So is there any chance of them actually stripping Harry of his wand?”

“No,” Severus stated. “That would require them to anger Albus, which no one in the Ministry will want to do. Instead, they’ll do their best to tarnish Potter’s reputation.”

“To make his claims about the Dark Lord less believable,” Remus finished.

“And there’s nothing we could about it?” Sirius asked.

“Unless if he was with another witch or wizard at the time, or they would accept his pensive as proof, I doubt it.”

“Why would that matter?”

“The underage magic provision is location dependent, not individualized. If you’re underage and with another wizard, you could easily pass it off as the other wizards magic. It’s not a secret they share often.”

Remus blinked. “I never knew that.”

“Yes. There’s a reason for that.”

“So you’re telling me that every summer I could have used magic as long as I pretended it was my parents?” Sirius asked.

“There’s the reason.”

“How do you know this?” Remus inquired with genuine curiosity.

“Personal experience,” Severus replied briefly.

Remus let out a disbelieving chuckle. “I bet your students would love to know this. And unfortunately, Harry was only with his muggle cousin. Won’t work here.”

“Then I suppose you’ll go through with the trial. The *Daily Prophet* won’t be kind to him, but if you play it right, you can swing the story.”

“By…?” Remus asked.

“Find a reporter who will be willing to pose it as a cover-up. Position Potter as the victim to the Ministry’s ineptitude and the trial is their attempt to divert the blame. Or don’t worry about the optics at all. The story will surely pass quickly if the boy is innocent.”

“Do this often?” Sirius teased, and Severus rolled his eyes.

“The Dark Lord taught me about this when I was first starting off. You’d be surprised how important optics are to someone like him.”

“Why the fuck would Voldemort care about his image?”

“Because people are so scared of him they won’t even say his name,” Remus answered, glancing at Severus. “Right?”

Severus nodded.

“If you have any more advice about Harry, we would appreciate it. He’s only fifteen. He doesn’t need this pressure just yet.”

“I’ll let you know,” Severus sighed. He glanced at the clock. “I believe I have to go. See you later tonight, Sirius?”

“Of course,” Sirius replied, and if it wasn’t for Remus standing there, Severus was sure he would have done something he would have regretted.

Ghost

Chapter Notes

Warning: Mentions of suicide (both thoughts and previous attempts)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Harry's presence elated Sirius, and he did little to hide it. It was wonderful to see the boy again after their hurried meeting at the end of the year. Harry appeared just as excited, but it was apparent how nervous he was over the trial. Sirius did his best to console him, but with the date approaching, it became increasingly harder.

After about a week and a half after Harry arrived, he came knocking on Sirius's door late at night. Severus had rushed to hide in the bathroom, which Sirius found oddly amusing. It was almost like he was a teenager trying to hide his illicit affairs. His amusement quickly died when he caught sight of Harry's face.

"Harry?" Sirius asked. Harry looked tense, his face drawn and his eyes bright with anxiety.

"Sirius," Harry stuttered, standing in the doorway. "Do you think you have time to talk?"

"Of course, come in," Sirius replied, taking a seat. Harry followed suit. "Is everything okay?"

"Umm…I," Harry began, struggling for words.

"It's okay. Take your time."

"Do you think I can do this, Sirius?"

Sirius knew exactly what he was talking about, and he struggled to think of a response.

"I don't know, Harry," he responded honestly. The last thing Harry needed was a deceitful, fluffy answer.

"But he can't win?"

"No. He can't. But he's a very powerful wizard, Harry, and a very evil one."

Harry nodded, his eyes cast towards the floor.

"It won't be easy, Harry. And I don't know what will happen. But I do know that we are surrounded by very talented wizards, yourself included, who are going to give him one hell of a fight."

"But what if we lose?"

"Then we lose."

Harry glanced up at him, confusion written over his face. "Sirius, that…"

“Harry, listen to me. I live by a philosophy, and it’s probably just bullshit, but the idea is that a lot of stuff is outside of our control, so it’s up to us to make the best of it and put up the hardest fight we can. And that’s what we’re going to do. And if everything wills it so, then we’ll win. It won’t happen if we don’t try. Now on the other hand, even if we do everything we can, it might not work out. You can’t control that. All you can control is yourself, Harry, and becoming a good, kind person who fights for what you believe.”

Harry swallowed hard. “You think?” he said weakly.

“Yes,” Sirius replied definitively. He had a lot of time to think in Azkaban, and after all those years, this was the manner in how he wanted to view his life. Maybe it was wrong, but it sure as hell helped.

“I’m still worried, Sirius.”

“I am too.”

Harry was quiet, his hands gripping the armchair. “But what about me?” Harry whispered, his voice barely carrying across the room.

Sirius stared directly into Harry’s brilliant eyes. “What about you? Your parents would be so incredibly proud of who you’ve become, and you should too. *I’m* incredibly proud of you.”

Harry twisted his hands in his lap. “Thank you, Sirius.”

Sirius sat thinking for a moment. “Hey, do you know of a book called *Lord of the Rings?”*

“It’s by JR Tolkien right?”

“Yeah,” Sirius grinned. He stood up to and walked over to his bookcase. “You’ve ever read them?”

Harry shook his head.

Sirius scanned his collection of books until he fell upon *The Fellowship of the Ring*. “I think you’ll like it. It’s about people who are in a similar situation like us, but with more elves and hobbits and magic rings. They have to overcome an evil force but in the form of a giant glowing red eye.”

“I didn’t know you liked to read.”

“It was my act of teenage rebellion. I would leave all these dreaded muggle novels around the house to annoy my mother, and at one point or another, I picked one up and found I couldn’t stop.”

Harry smiled. “That’s a bit unusual.”

Sirius laughed. “Your dad thought it was ridiculous and told me I needed to start snorting cocaine to balance it out.”

Harry brightened at the mention of James, and Sirius felt a pang of guilt. He handed the book to Harry who traced the cover.

“Let me know if you like it,” Sirius continued. “There’s two more after that one.”

Harry offered a small smile. “Hermione’s probably read it.”

“What hasn’t that girl read?”

Harry stood up. “Sorry to bother you, Sirius. I just couldn’t sleep.”

Before Harry could move away, Sirius pulled him into a hug. Harry settled against him, and Sirius held him tightly.

“You’re never bothering me. I’m always here for you, Harry, if you need anything, anything at all. Life played you a hard hand, and it sucks. But you have so many people who care about you, and you don’t have to do this alone.”

Harry shook against him. “Thank you, Sirius,” he repeated, and they remained in the hug until Harry pulled away. “Should probably get to sleep.”

Sirius smiled and nodded, watching as Harry left. It hurt to see Harry so frightened, but it hurt him more to realize he could do nothing about it. He was a useless pawn in this game while Harry was the key player, and he wanted more than anything to trade places to relieve Harry of the burden.

After a moment, Severus reentered the room. He stood silently, waiting for Sirius to speak.

“You think we’re going to win this war?” he finally asked, and Severus blinked at the somberness of his voice. He took a minute before replying.

“I…yes, but I think many of us will die along the way.”

“That’s morbid,” Sirius muttered. “Who do you think won’t make it?”

“Me,” Severus began, and Sirius’s blood ran cold. “Moody. Kingsley. You. Lupin. Minerva. Ron Weasley. Maybe more, I don’t know. It’s only guesses.”

“Ron?” Sirius asked weakly.

“He’ll sacrifice himself for Potter.”

“You?”

“I don’t exactly have the safest job, Sirius.”

“Me?”

“You’ll also sacrifice yourself for Potter.”

“Yeah, I would.”

Severus nodded, his lips pressed thin.

“It’ll be worth it though, in the end. When he falls.”

“Yes, it will.”

“That’s how you get through all the shit he does to you, right?”

“It’s for the greater good,” Severus responded sourly. “If what I do now enables Potter to win later, then it will all be worth it.”

“Even if you die along the way?”

“Yes.”

Sirius paused, considering his next question. Invasive? Yes. He didn’t give a fuck.

“You’re suicidal, aren’t you? Or at least you used to be.”

Severus took a long moment to respond. “Yes. Used to be.”

“You actually try to kill yourself?” Sirius pressured.

“Yes,” Severus replied bluntly. The confession was almost shocking, but Sirius had expected it. It had been a thought festering in the back of his mind, and he needed to voice it. Sirius waited for him to elaborate, and he could tell he was being cruel. However, all this talk of death and war stripped him of empathy. “Several times when I was sixteen. Also tried when I was twenty-two. Never worked.”

“Guess you’re just really bad at killing yourself?”

“Yes. I am.”

“And now?”

“I’m still just as bad at killing myself,” Severus responded.

“No. You still want to die?”

Severus fell silent again. “I have little sense of self-preservation and I don’t think I would oppose death, but I don’t actively seek it. I have reasons to live.”

Sirius let out a bitter laugh. “Don’t I know that all too well.”

“Are you finished with this line of questioning?” Severus snapped, and Sirius glanced over at him.

“You don’t care if you die in this war,” he stated.

“Not particularly.”

“I…why?”

“Why?” Severus snarled, and Sirius was surprised at the venom in his voice. “Maybe I’ll finally find some fucking peace.”

“People would miss you,” Sirius replied impulsively.

“Like who?”

“Albus would. And Minerva and Molly.”

“Three people then?”

“And me. I would miss you,” Sirius confessed, and he could sense the thoughts racing through Severus’s head.

“Black, if you have something to say…”

Sirius sighed. He had plenty to say, but it would be too much for tonight. Also, he couldn't approach it with Severus so defensive. No, it was best saved for another time.

"Not tonight. And sorry about this. I'm not in the best of moods if you couldn't tell, and it was shitty of me to ask you that stuff."

"Fine," Severus muttered. "Well, now you know. Now if you don't mind, I would like to sleep." He moved to the bed and climbed in on the far side. Sirius sighed. It was almost like a lover's spat, and if they weren't so insistent on sharing a bed, he would be designated to the couch. As he rightfully should be.

Now, instead, he would have lie on the far end of the bed and hope for some sleep to sort out the mess in his head.

Sirius woke up to an empty bed, and he sighed in frustration. It was easier to make up after fights in the early morning than letting it linger all day. Unfortunately, Severus appeared to want to delay the inevitable.

Sirius wasn't surprised to hear that Severus had been suicidal. If half the shit Severus went through had happened to him, he would have slit his wrists years ago. In Azkaban, he had gotten close several times, but his desire to punch Pettigrew in his ugly face and get his well-earned revenge prevented him from actually following through.

What angered him was how flippantly Severus treated his life. If Sirius had to die, he would do so with as much fight as possible, but Severus sounded resigned. He was a man counting down the days until the curtains closed. Even if Sirius wasn't so heavily invested in the man, he couldn't ignore how fucked up that was.

He didn't know if he could broach the topic again. Last night's conversation went badly enough, and he doubted Severus wanted to delve into it. Knowing him, however, it would come out at some point.

Until then, he would just have to wait.

He rose out of bed and headed downstairs. The day passed with relative ease, and before he knew it, night had snuck out of its trenches and overtaken the day.

He retreated to his bedroom and waited for Severus to show. Sirius picked up a book to read while he waited, a novel by Donna Tartt titled *The Secret History*. He measured the time in pages, and as he struck the 150th page, he admitted to himself that Severus wasn't coming.

"Fuck," he whispered to himself. He didn't know if this was due to the fight or to Voldemort, but he really didn't want to spend tonight anxious and alone.

He certainly wouldn't be able to spend tonight sober, so with a wince, he grabbed whiskey from the drawer and poured himself a hefty glass. At best, he would drink himself into a slumber and by the time he awoke, Severus would be back.

If not…the hours stretched in front of him for miles and his legs itched like ants under his skin.

He downed the glass, poured another, tried to refocus on the book, and let the hours slip by.

At one point or another, he must have dozed off. When he awoke, it was nearing morning, and there was still no sign of Severus. Concern twisted in his stomach, and he let out a string of curses. He wished he could storm off to Hogwarts, and his helplessness frustrated him. He threw the glass against the wall, taking pleasure in watching it shatter and prepared for another long day.

The day lingered, fighting against the night with every breath in its body. If it wasn't for Harry and Remus, Sirius wasn't so sure he would have made it, and he could feel the initial tendrils of a panic attack snaking around him. He needed Severus to be there for him tonight and he walked to his room in uneasy anticipation.

He paused at the door, wishing desperately to open it and see Severus's ugly mug frowning back at him. The need of it startled him.

Unable to stand it anymore, he threw open the door and was met with…nothing. The room was unchanged, and the hollowness cut into Sirius.

He fingered the necklace around his neck nervously. It was his insurance and reassurance. As long as he had this, Severus would return to him.

Unless if Voldemort had done something truly terrible to him. Severus said their meetings never lasted longer than a night, but then again, could anyone predict Voldemort's actions?

As he stood there, a terrible thought struck Sirius. He could envision it perfectly: Severus naked and bruised handcuffed to a bed while Voldemort smiled down at him and traced a cold finger down the lines of Severus's chest. The thought made him sick, and he stumbled into the room.

He started pacing to drive the thought out of his head and curb the growing anxiety. If only Severus had sent a sign or some indication of his wellbeing. Then Sirius wouldn't feel like an iron band was clenching his chest.

He considered turning into Padfoot where his emotions distilled and simplified. It would be like Azkaban again, but it would make things easier. He didn't know if he could make it through another night like this alone.

He continued to pace as the anxiety expanded inside of him like sticky tar. It clogged up his lungs and sped up his heart and pulled at his limbs.

He didn't hear the knock at first, but when he did, he rushed towards the door. He threw it open, grateful for a distraction, and stared into the somber face of Albus.

He could feel his hopes falling from him like broken constellations. Questions thrummed through his mind about Severus while panic electrified him.

"Come in," he stuttered, and Albus entered the room.

"Are you okay?" Albus asked concerned. Sirius could usually disguise his panic better, but he feared for Severus. Had Voldemort hurt him badly? Had he killed him?

"Severus," he forced out, frightened of the response.

Albus looked like he wanted to comment more on Sirius's wellbeing but noting Sirius's impatience addressed the issue directly. "He's okay, Sirius, but he needed me to talk with you."

"Fuck," Sirius whispered. "It's over, isn't it? He wants to end it."

Albus shook his head. “No, not at all.”

Sirius wanted to be embarrassed at how much relief that statement caused him.

“Then what’s wrong? Where is he?”

“Voldemort has sent him on a diplomatic mission to the vampire coven located on the Orkney Islands of Scotland. He is tasked with recruiting them to the Death Eater’s cause. He came to me last night with the details and wanted me to inform you that he won’t be back for another two weeks at least.”

“Jesus,” Sirius muttered. “Two weeks?”

“He’ll be back as soon as he can, Sirius.”

“Is this normal? For Sev to be sent on a mission like this?”

Albus nodded grimly. “Severus has informed me that several other Death Eaters have been sent on extended missions to recruit. Unfortunately, it happens to be Severus’s turn.”

“Will you hear anything from him when’s away?”

“No,” Albus sighed. “He said it would be too dangerous. We’re both in the dark and can only hope for a swift return.”

Sirius ran a hand through his hair as anxiety burned in his stomach. He thought two days had been bad, but this would be for two full fucking weeks.

A thought struck Sirius. “How will you know if he’s hurt then? Or if he’s…?”

“We have an emergency message that Severus will send if he sees no way out. Other than that, we have to put our faith in him.”

Sirius clenched his eyes shut. “Ok,” he repeated. “Ok.”

“He’ll be okay,” Albus consoled. “You know how he is.”

Sirius nodded, not trusting himself to speak.

Albus regarded him. “Do you want me to stay for a while, Sirius?”

“No, it’s okay,” Sirius said even though it wasn’t okay. “I need some time to think this through.”

Albus looked at him sadly. “He’ll be back to you as soon as he can. Until then we have to trust in him and continue on as best as we can.”

“I know,” Sirius swallowed thickly. He had nothing else to say, and Albus realized this and took his leave. When the door shut, Sirius sat heavily on the bed and stared at the floor. A headache built in his temples and worries threatened to tear him apart, so before he could think too much into it, he embraced Padfoot and allowed the worries to melt into a vague concern. He would spend two weeks as a dog, if he had too. Only so that he didn’t have to admit how much he cared for Severus and how it would devastate him to never see the man again.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for making it to the end of another chapter!

I love reading all the comments, so thank you for that too :)

Also - just finished Mindhunter, so if you need a show to watch, definitely recommend, the atmosphere and tension in the show is very well done (and the serial killers are fascinating if macabre).

Return

Chapter Notes

I've been on a writing binge these past two weeks, but I realized I also needed to post! So here's a chapter and it's a good one this time :)

The story itself has taken a very interesting turn as an event unfolded in a way I hadn't predicted and now I'm writing the fallout...I'm hoping the momentum will carry me to the end. It's also the second-longest thing I have ever written - I wrote a Death Note fanfiction which was a strong 137k but this may pass it? We'll have to see. (Also if you want to read my earnest attempt at Death Note fanfic, I'll scavenge the depths of fanfiction.net to find it - I was rather proud of it at the time and should reread it myself if I can stand it.)

Two weeks passed with excruciating slowness, and Sirius almost rather would have preferred Azkaban.

In Azkaban time existed as a non-entity. It held no bearing on him besides a vague sense of time passing, but minutes appeared no different than years. Counting the days was an interesting hobby and nothing more. However, in Grimmauld Palace, he experienced each fully defined hour which transformed into never-ending days and eternal weeks.

Albus had yet to receive word from Severus, and it was eating Sirius alive. His insomnia had returned full-force. He struggled through the daily motions, lost any semblance of appetite, and drank far too much. Remus had taken notice of Sirius's deteriorating state and began to sit with him at night to help pass the time.

Their conversation would skitter around the topic that haunted Sirius. Any belief that his feelings in Severus were purely a casual interest had long been dispelled. Remus knew just as well. What Sirius felt for the Severus had ventured far beyond a casual friendship.

He had only felt like this once before in a part of him he forced himself to forget. That time had captured his heart in the same way, and every absence felt painfully acute. He had loved that person with every inch of his being.

Not that he ever thought about it, of course.

One cold, lonely night, the similarities became too much to ignore, and Sirius finally allowed the thought to manifest.

He, the idiot that he was, had fallen in love with his hated rival. And he fucking missed him.

Severus, on the other hand, could feel nothing for Sirius. He may want nothing from him. Yet a part of him knew this couldn't be true.

If Remus hadn't knocked on the door that one morning, Sirius was certain that Severus would have kissed him. The thought sent ungainly butterflies knocking around his stomach. He

knew now that he had to finish the act when Severus returned before it became unbearable.

This decision lingered on his mind as he sat down for dinner with everyone in the house. Harry's trial had passed three days ago, and he had been fully acquitted, much to everyone's pleasure. He appeared much more relaxed, and the mood had brightened considerably.

It has also been approximately sixteen days since Sirius had last seen Severus. Sixteen days of sleepless nights. Sixteen days of anxiety and heartache. Sirius downed his wine to block the line of thought.

Molly had prepared chicken for tonight, but Sirius couldn't summon an appetite. He had a few bites to help quell suspicion, but for the most part, left it untouched. Remus glanced over with a look of concern, but no one else appeared to notice.

The twins were giving a detailed account of a prank they played on Filch, drawing disapproving tuts from Molly and hysterical laughter from the other kids. Sirius wished he could join in, yet in the style of heartache, everything became humorless. He grimly swirled his wine and wondered where Severus was now and whether he was tired or hurt or suffering. His helplessness drove a sharp wedge in his side.

As the twin's story continued to build and the laughter grew louder, almost no one heard the door slowly open. It was Molly who first looked up, her eyes widening.

"Severus!" She exclaimed, and Sirius whipped his head around. He locked eyes with Severus, and the relief was so profound and intense that he was tempted to laugh. For the first time in sixteen days, he felt like he could breathe. Every fiber in his body screamed at him to rush over, draw Severus into his arms, and kiss him until they were breathless and dizzy. Even then, he wouldn't let go. He never wanted to let go of him ever again.

"Molly," Severus said, his voice raspy. He coughed, and his body trembled slightly at the effort. He had no visible injuries, but the bags under his eyes and gauntness of his face worried Sirius.

"Sit, sit," Molly ordered, leaving her chair and allowing Severus to sit. Severus stilled in the chair, his slender hands resting motionless on the table.

"I was wondering if it wouldn't be a problem, if I could have some tea," Severus said, his voice soft and vacant.

"Of course," Molly replied, summoning some tea and placing it in Severus's hands. "There's also chicken, green beans, potatoes, and some toasted bread." Without waiting for a response, she grabbed a piece of bread and placed it in front of Severus. "Eat this," she ordered, and Severus complied.

At this point, the table had fallen silent as everyone watched the exchange. Sirius had realized in the meetings that Molly shared some connection with Severus but lacked the background of the relationship. He was grateful for Molly tonight and for what she meant to Severus.

"Do you need me to call Albus?" Molly asked, and Severus shook his head.

"Already talked to him."

"Do you need anything?"

“Just…” Severus trailed off, his brow furrowing. Vulnerability threatened to expose him, but he smoothed out his face and kept the blankness in his eyes. “More tea, maybe?”

Molly smiled softly. “You can have all the tea in the world if you’d like.”

“Thank you.” His dark eyes glanced around the table, resting on Harry. “How was the trial?”

Harry startled, apparently uncomfortable by Severus’s attention. “Umm, it was good. Cleared of all charges. Headmaster Dumbledore saved me at the last minute because Fudge and Umbridge really wanted the charges to go through.” His voice lightened. “Don’t worry, Professor, I won’t be out of your class anytime soon.”

“Unfortunately, that means you will have to continue to run the risk of Longbottom exploding a cauldron in your face one day, Mr. Potter,” Severus quipped tiredly, the tilt of his lips hinting at humor.

Harry laughed, setting the room at ease. It lasted for a moment until a gruff voice spoke up from the end of the table.

“Care to explain where you’ve been for the past two weeks?” Moody asked, suspicion tinging his voice. Sirius froze and stared at Severus, who avoided his gaze.

“It will be discussed in the Order meeting,” Severus replied, his voice low and reserved.

“Really? We’ll get to hear about all the gritty little details of your special mission for your precious Voldemort?”

Severus’s jaw clenched, but before he could reply, Molly had stood up and was staring daggers at Moody.

“Alastor now is not the time nor the place. My children are here, and you have no right to discuss this.” Fire laced her voice.

Moody stared back evenly. “So be it. But when he betrays us to-“

“You either stop talking or you leave. Now,” Sirius ordered, speaking before he could fully think of what he was saying. He glowered at Moody.

“Now I wouldn’t have thought you had joined the Snape fan club, Sirius,” Moody stated slowly, and Sirius clenched his fist.

“Like I said. Leave,” Sirius forced out, anger piercing his voice. Moody regarded him coolly before slowing standing up.

“I look forward to the meeting,” Moody leered, before finally exiting. The room, tense and uncomfortable, waited for someone to speak.

“I should go,” Severus finally admitted. He placed the tea down and gingerly stood up.

“No,” Sirius stated bluntly. “None of us want you to leave.” Or as he should say, he didn’t want Severus to leave. The sentiment was expressed clearly enough, and Severus settled back in his seat.

Molly huffed. “Alastor can be very infuriating,” she said sweetly, and her children stared at

her in awe. “Potatoes, dear?” She plopped some potatoes on Severus’s plate. “Now, George, I believe you were saying?”

George stared at her awed for a second longer, before launching into the story and spurring on laughter. The room, still tense, felt manageable. Severus slowly ate the potatoes and seemed ignorant of the twin’s antics.

Sirius couldn’t take his eyes off of him for the entire dinner.

Eventually, dinner drew to a close, and the kids retreated upstairs. Arthur, Remus, and Tonks excused themselves, leaving Molly, Sirius and Severus alone.

Molly had spent the whole dinner fretting over Severus and only now settled back in her seat.

Sirius coughed, his hands aching to reach out and touch the other man.

“So you’re back,” Sirius stated, attempting to keep his voice light and unbothered. Severus looked over at him, his eyes impossibly dark.

“Yes, I am.”

“Any vampires take a bite out of you?”

Severus’s lips twitched. “No, none were so lucky.”

“I’m glad to hear that.”

“Did you eat at all while you were there?” Molly cut in, her eyes peering intently at Severus.

“Not particularly,” Severus responded, and Molly sighed.

“Next time you leave on one of these missions, you’re bringing some of my cooking,” she ordered. “You don’t need to get any skinnier than you already are.”

“I did miss your mince pies, Molly,” Severus said softly, and the relationship between him and Molly intrigued Sirius. There was history here and from what he could tell, love.

Molly hummed. “I’ll make them for dinner tomorrow. And I expect you to eat them.”

“Of course, Molly.”

“Good. Now I expect you want to talk to Sirius?” Molly asked bluntly, and Sirius froze. Severus blinked in surprise. Molly noted their discomfort. “What? You expected me not to notice what has happened between the two of you? Severus, I know you far too well for that.”

“Has anyone else realized?” Sirius asked carefully. He had tried to be subtle about their relationship as it wouldn’t help for half the Order to know about it.

“Arthur’s mentioned something to me, and Tonks might have picked up on it too, but no one else has to the best of my knowledge. Certainly none of the children. And I assume Remus knows.”

“When did you figure it out?” Sirius continued, curiosity getting the better of him.

“Oh, you know,” Molly began casually, “Severus has seemed much happier, and you appeared ready to fall apart any moment for the past two weeks. I’ve seen this all before.”

Severus regarded Molly, a wry smile on his lips.“I always underestimate you,” he said.

“I’m happy that you’re happy. It’s been long enough.” She leaned over and kissed Severus on the cheek. “Dinner tomorrow. And talk with Sirius. He’s been a mess for the past two weeks, even though he probably doesn’t want me telling you that.” She smiled warmly at Severus. “I’m glad you’re back and safe.”

In a flurry of motion, she stood up, wished them goodnight, and left the room. Sirius stood at the space she had previously occupied. “She’s incredible, isn’t she?”

Severus started to respond but dissolved into a coughing fit. “Yes, she is,” he finally said when he gathered his breath. Sirius stared at him worried.

An awkward silence fell between them, and Sirius wanted to bang his head against the table. They had always shared silences in comfort before, but sixteen days gaped between them.

“So tell me, did the vampires sparkle?” Sirius bantered, unsure of how to approach anything else. He depended on Severus, worried that he would offend him and anger him. He would crack his stupid jokes if it meant Severus would stay.

“Excuse me?”

“Never read *Twilight*? You’re missing out.”

Severus blinked at him. “And in this novel, the vampires…sparkle?”

“Obviously.”

“Black, is this what you do in your free time?”

“What else would I be doing?”

Severus stared at him bemused and rolled his eyes. “No, Sirius. The vampires did not sparkle.”

“Shame,” Sirius sighed. “I really had my hopes up.”

Silence fell across the room again, but Sirius felt marginally more comfortable.

“Do you want to move upstairs?” Severus inquired, glancing down at the table. “If that still…”

“Yeah, of course,” Sirius shot back. He stood up, watching carefully as Severus gingerly moved towards the door. They climbed the stairs in silence and slipped into Sirius’s room. Severus removed his shoes and shrugged off the heavier of his clothes.

“Tired?” Sirius asked lightly.

“Fucking nightmares,” he growled. He stood so close, and Sirius yearned to close the gap. He didn’t have the courage to do so, and the thought made him angry. He was a fucking Gryffindor, for Christ’s sake.

“My insomnia came back too,” Sirius said instead. “Spent a lot of nights sleepless.”

Severus nodded, looking over at Sirius. His eyes were chips of obsidian, and Sirius could feel himself losing grasp of his thoughts.

Severus walked over to the bed and sat down heavily. The action caused another coughing fit to break out.

Pulled by an invisible string, Sirius sat next to Severus and waited for the other man to speak.

"I'm sorry I left without warning. I wasn't prepared and barely had enough time to tell Albus."

"It's okay," Sirius said, even though it wasn't. "I'm just glad you're back. And that you're okay."

"Me too," he sighed. "It was, ah, challenging to be without you."

Sirius paused. Despite the sixteen days of separation, he remained scarily in-tune with Severus's emotions. Severus had all his protections and shields up and was as heavily guarded here as he was at Order meetings.

"You're still not down from it yet," Sirius stated, startled at how easily the realization came to him.

"No, I suppose not," Severus replied after a moment. "It was a long sixteen days."

"What happened?"

Severus's brow furrowed and he glanced down as if trying to remember something. "It's- I'm not sure-they did something before I left" he began frantically, the words rushing from his mouth. "Something-I don't know-"

Sirius wrapped an arm around him and pulled him close. "Shh, it's been a long day. You'll remember in the morning, okay? And we can talk about it then."

Severus stilled against him and nodded slightly. "Okay," he murmured. "Do you think-" he began, his voice nebulous. "If you could talk to me. About anything. I didn't- I would like to hear your voice if that's okay?" he finished timidly, and Sirius rubbed circles into his forearm.

For a brief moment, Sirius wanted to blurt out how deeply he had missed the man, how he had realized he loved the man, and how for the past week, he'd been constantly fretting over that fact.

He decided against it.

Instead, he launched into a recap of the events of Grimmauld. He described Harry's trial, Ron and Hermione's new prefect status, and the new pranks of the twins. He joked about Mundugnus's shortcomings in the previous Order meetings and complained about Kreacher's annoyances. The words fell out of his mouth in a long, barely comprehensible stream about everything and nothing.

At first, Severus had stared blankly at the wall, still too much in his own head to pay attention. Slowly, Sirius noticed the other man coming down from whatever headspace he had stuck himself into for the past two weeks. His shoulders relaxed, his eyes stopped staring vacantly, and he would hum appropriate responses.

Encouraged, Sirius continued. He didn't even think it mattered what he said as long as he was saying it so he launched into elaborate descriptions of the past dinners and Harry's opinion of Lord of the Rings and how much he hated Crookshanks.

Severus slowly relaxed, and as he did, exhaustion reclaimed him. He slumped forward as the rigor and control he'd maintained deserted him. His head lolled slightly, and Sirius was about to move aside when Severus laid his head on Sirius's shoulder. His eyes drifted shut, and his breath tickled Sirius's neck.

'Fuck,' Sirius thought definitively. His emotional state was unprepared to handle this type of intimacy.

Severus mumbled something against his neck, and Sirius snapped back into the moment.

"What'd you say?"

"What about you?" The words dripped from Severus's mouth like water from an icicle. "Tell me about you."

Sirius stood at a crossroads. He could skirt around the question and remain mundane or face the beast where it stood. He was too much of a Gryffindor to have it any other way.

"I was worried sick about you. Couldn't sleep. Couldn't eat. I missed you, Sev, missed you badly."

"Missed you too," Severus mumbled back.

"I…I also thought a lot when you were gone. About you. And me."

Severus had stilled against him.

"I don't want you to leave me again without you knowing this. And even though it's probably a terrible time now, I don't think I can wait anymore."

Sirius summoned up every ounce of courage.

"I care about you, Severus. More than I care about anyone else."

Deep breath.

"And I want you, Severus. I want you in every way possible. I want you in the mornings and the afternoons and the nights. I want you happy and sad and angry. I want your smile and your laughter and your intelligence and your humor. I want you, Severus, more than I want anything else in this world."

Severus froze against him, his breathing short.

"Sirius," he began, and Sirius could feel ice coursing through his veins. Here would come the rejection, the pity, the shame.

"Sirius," Severus repeated, "I think I would like to kiss you very much right now."

He pulled always slightly so he could angle his head upwards and Sirius peered down into the exhausted yet happy obsidian eyes and the crooked nose and the supple mouth.

It took him less than a second to close the distance.

Phantom

Chapter Notes

Everything is not as it seems...

Severus woke with a start as he heard the door click open. His heart rate ratcheted, and he scrambled for his wand. Duncan always had eyes on him, and to sleep so deeply was dangerous. He scrambled to collect himself and prepare himself for any game Duncan was inclined to today. Duncan's games weren't pleasant, but if he played it correctly…

He quickly glanced around the room, his mind stumbling over the fact that it was Sirius's. A foggy memory of him returning to Grimmauld Palace floated upwards, but it hurt to think of it and he turned his mind away.

"Jesus Christ, Sev," the man in the doorway called out, and that wasn't Duncan. Nor was it Dommik or Serena or Cyprian. "Sev," the man repeated, "Hey, look at me. It's okay. You're okay. You're not there anymore."

"Sirius," Severus croaked in realization, and Sirius nodded, taking a slow step into the room.

"Yes. It's me. Sirius. Is it okay if I come closer?'

Severus wanted to say yes, but he hesitated. He couldn't act foolishly. Even if the man looked like Sirius, he had to doubt everything. It was how their game was played.

He stared at Sirius with distrust, trying to pick up on any tics that would give him away.

Severus tightened his grip on his wand. "No," he stated coldly.

"No?" Sirius repeated, his Adam apple bobbing up and down. "What's wrong Sev?"

The concern looked so real on Sirius's face that if Severus didn't know better, he would have fallen instantly.

"Nothing's wrong. I'd rather not be woken up in such a manner, however," Severus said, trying to staunch any betrayal of emotion. Duncan knew exactly where to hit, but Severus wouldn't play into it. Not today. Not when he was so close to an agreement. "I'm not sure what exactly your role is in this, or what you are even. Regardless, I believe Duncan and I needed to conclude our talks. Now if you'll excuse me."

The phantom wouldn't move, and Severus gritted his teeth. He needed to get out of this mockery of a room and leave this impression behind. He stood and moved to the door, but the phantom didn't step out of the way.

"Severus," the phantom repeated, and Severus kept his eyes firmly fixed on the door. This mock-Sirius looked too real, and he couldn't waver. If he did, he would lose.

“I said excuse me,” Severus forced out in his harshest tone.

“I…” the phantom began, bewildered. “Severus, you’re safe. You’re at Grimmauld Palace. You arrived here last night. It’s me, Sirius. We spent the night together. I don’t know who Duncan is, but he’s not here.”

“You’re lying” Severus reaffirmed, more for himself than to prove the phantom wrong. “You’re one of Duncan’s games. I’m rather not in the mood this morning to play.”

“Severus,” the phantom started in disbelief. “You don’t think it’s me.”

Severus’s gaze flickered over to the phantom, and that one brief second of eye contact gutted him.

“No. Because it’s not you.”

“Is this what this Duncan did to you? Make you think you saw people who weren’t real?”

“I have nothing more to say to you,” Severus tried again, but his voice wavered. He needed fresh air. He needed to be back with the real Sirius.

“Severus, how can I prove to you that I’m real?”

“You can’t. Because you’re not. Now, I’m sorry, but I really have to go.” Severus tried to make it to the door, but the phantom reached out and trying to grab his arm. Severus moved out of its reach as quickly as he could and bolted for the door. He slammed the door behind him and breathed deeply. He could hear the phantom shouting at him through the door, and he locked it for good measure.

He rested his head against the door and pushed down any semblance of emotion. He couldn’t break down, not here. He had to be back with Sirius first before he could even consider the emotional implications.

“Professor?” a voice called out, and Severus turned to stare directly at Harry Potter. It took only a second for him to recognize Duncan’s intentions, and to his surprise, anger pounded through him. He was sick of these games, sick of these godforsaken vampires.

He took a step towards the boy. “I’m finished, do you understand?” he hissed. “I’m done with these games. Run back and tell your master that he needs to make a decision, and he needs to make it now.”

The boy trembled. “Professor,” he gulped. “I’m not sure…I can go get the Headmaster if you want.”

“Why would I want that?” Severus stood confused. The boy in front of him appeared genuinely scared, and the phantom continued to pound on the door.

“I’m not sure,” the boy squeaked. His eyes flickered over towards the door. “Is that Sirius in there?”

“I don’t know,” Severus faltered. “Do you think you’re going to pretend to die painfully in the next few minutes?” he asked, his voice low and too unguarded for his liking.

The boy blinked. “No, I wasn’t planning on it.”

“Are you one of Duncan’s?” Severus whispered, trying desperately to note any tells.

“I don’t know who that is, professor,” the boy answered. “Do you still want me to get Dumbledore?”

Severus felt sick. Duncan had twisted his mind, and he couldn’t tell if his memories of returning to Grimmauld were real or induced. They could be real, for all he knew, but the fear that he was wrong held him back.

“I…I’m not sure. You have to understand. I’m not sure if you’re real or not.”

“I think I’m real, Professor.”

“That’s what everyone says.”

“Oh,” the boy stood there confused. “Is this because of where you’ve been these past two weeks?”

“I’m not sure if I’m really back,” Severus admitted quietly. If this was Duncan, he had slipped up too much to claim any sort of victory. He shuddered to think of what the negotiations would look like.

“You are, Professor. You came in last night, and you had dinner with us.”

“Yes, but I’m not sure if those memories were implanted to confuse me.”

“So you think you’re still wherever you were?”

“I’m sure you see the problem.”

“Is there any way to prove it, Professor?”

“I don’t know. He pulls upon my memories so these, ah, hallucinations are very hard to distinguish.”

“So you just have to trust that I’m real?”

“I can’t afford to be wrong.”

The boy stood there, his brow crinkling in thought. “I should probably get Dumbledore. He’ll know what to do.”

A pound made the door shake next to Severus. The boy’s gaze flashed over to it. “That’s Sirius,” he stated, and the certainty made Severus pause. Fear kept his hand from the door.

“I have to be sure before I see him.”

Confusion crossed the boy’s face. “Yeah, okay. I can go get Remus to call Dumbledore.”

Severus nodded, and the boy ran downstairs. Severus remained where he was, trying to ignore the pounding behind him. If he was still with Duncan, he knew exactly what would happen if he opened the door, and it wasn’t something he could afford to handle.

Ten minutes passed, and Severus determinedly went over the events of the past few days. He needed to find a catch and prove he had indeed left. Last night sparked up in him. Sirius and he had exchanged a kiss, but he was too scared to consider the fact that it could have been fake.

All his other memories were non-linear, jumbles of events and impressions. Pain, of course, and fear were almost ever-present, but he struggled to reach anything else. A headache split his head, and he cried out softly for some clarity.

Shortly, Albus entered the hallway with Remus and Harry in tow.

"Severus," Albus called out gently. Severus flinched out of his thoughts and stared wide-eyed as Albus. He sounded and looked like Albus. Why couldn't he just believe he was?

Because of Duncan. That's why.

"Severus," Albus repeated. "Harry's explained what you think is happening. I know you're in an uncomfortable and frightening situation. However, and listen closely, it's an after effect of Duncan's influence. What you are experiencing is real. I am real. Sirius is real. Harry is real."

Severus let out a strangled noise. "Albus, I can't be wrong about this."

"And you aren't."

"I don't know that."

"Then, Severus, I want you to trust me."

"I can't," Severus whimpered, ashamed. "If you're one of his…"

"I'm not, Severus. But if I was and you trust me on this and as a result, suffer, then the real me would go to the ends of the earth to hunt Duncan down. So please, Severus, trust me."

"For how long? How long do I have to pretend that you're him?"

"Duncan's magic is strong for it to continue to have such a hold on you. Do you remember the exact incantation he used?"

He shook his head, fear twisting himself into knots. A memory seared through him, a faint agony and glistening white teeth. "Blood," he stuttered out.

"Blood? Do you mean blood magic? Do you have a mark on you?"

With uncoordinated, jerky movements, Severus pulled his shirt off, exposing his chest. A convoluted mark stretched across his lower left ribs, red and festering and jagged.

Remus let out a curse under his breath.

"Oh Severus," Albus said softly. "You don't deserve this."

Severus made the strained sound again. "If you're you, really you, do you think…?"

"Yes, my son. Of course. Blood magic is difficult, so I'll need to get close."

"Okay," Severus agreed, and Albus walked up to him. He lay one hand on Severus's shoulder, and he flinched at the touch.

"It might be best if we sit. Blood magic is painful, my dear boy, and I won't be able to spare you from it."

"Doesn't matter. Just want it gone," Severus responded, sinking to the floor. Albus pulled

his wand out and began muttering under his breath. Harry watched transfixed.

Severus didn't feel anything at first, but suddenly, an excruciating pain began to radiate from the mark, causing his muscles to clench and his blood to turn to fire. He tasted blood, and his vision went dark. He could hear someone screaming, and only distantly realized it was him. The agony lasted and lasted and lasted.

And then it was over.

Strong arms pulled him into an embrace, and he shuddered against Albus. Albus murmured apologies, but Severus didn't care before he could feel the noticeable absence of paranoia. With the mark gone, things became clearer, his memories realigned and he realized with horror that the phantoms had been pathetic counterfeits. Only the mark had made them seem real.

Now, with it gone, Severus understood the reality of where he was and who he was with. His mind had returned to him, and terrible loss he had experienced cut into him. His mind was all he had, and to lose it hurt beyond comprehension.

"Severus," Albus murmured. "It's over. You're safe now."

The words crashed over Severus, and he smothered a sob. Albus held him tightly as Severus steadied himself. He couldn't afford to break down and pulled himself away. He leaned against the wall, eyes staring dully at the hallway.

Albus remained next to him, and when Severus finally found the strength to look up, he set his eyes on Remus, Harry, and Sirius.

Oh, god. Sirius.

A terrible expression had set itself on Sirius's face, and his hands trembled. He looked lost.

"Severus," Albus began, breaking through the horrid silence that had settled in the hallway. "Do you feel any pain?"

Severus swallowed thickly. "No, it's passed." His eyes flickered down the hallway. "Are we the only ones here?"

"I silenced the hallway," Albus explained. "No one heard."

"Oh," Severus responded weakly. He coughed. "Could I have some water?"

Albus quickly summoned some, and Severus sipped gratefully.

"I owe you an explanation," Severus murmured, leaning his head back against the wall.

"Take your time, my boy. You don't need to explain anything now."

Severus was tempted to accept the offer. He could regain his bearings and provide a sanitized version later. One he had thought through and could pretend to be true.

But Sirius's dark eyes stopped him.

"No," he refused. "I do. I frightened the boy."

Harry stood there abashed. "Professor, you don't need to worry about it. I'm fine. I was just surprised, that's all."

Severus furrowed his brow. “Potter,” he began, uncertain of how to get his point across.

Sirius, as always, seemed to pick up on it and sat down across from Severus. “How about you explained to my godson what happened?” His hands continued to tremble, but he appeared to have collected himself. His dark eyes peered at Severus, and Severus badly wanted to lose himself in their gaze. Then, he might be lucky enough to forget everything else.

Following Sirius’s cues, Remus sat down across from Albus, and Harry quickly followed suit.

“Okay, Severus,” Sirius started. “Where do you want to start?” He never broke eye contact with him, and if he tried hard enough, Severus could pretend he was just with Sirius. It made it easier.

“The Dark Lord ordered me to reach an agreement with a coven of vampires. He wanted their support in the war and some of their well-guarded secrets” he began, his voice low and slow. Sirius nodded. “The coven was led by a vampire named Duncan. As you saw, he dabbles in blood magic. He used blood magic as a way to test me. So I could prove my strength and convince him that the Death Eaters were deserving of his help. Pretty words wouldn’t be enough. Not to him.”

Severus halted, his mouth drying again. He took another sip of water and gingerly rubbed at his ribs. The memory catalyzed some of the pain again.

“The effect of the spell occurred gradually. Initially, objects appeared nebulous. I became confused easily. Negotiations were difficult, but I continued despite it.” The memories surged onto him, and he rushed the words out.

Sirius winced.

“I believe he upped the effects of the spell when I wouldn’t falter the first time. Then, he, then he-“

“Hey, it’s okay. Take your time,” Sirius comforted, and Severus squeezed his eyes shut.

“He introduced phantoms. Shadows that my addled mind cast into people. The phantoms, ah, would challenge me.”

“They were frightening,” Sirius stated.

Severus nodded. “They just seemed to know what to do to cause me…and I would struggle to tell them apart from reality, to remind myself it was fake. Duncan continued the negotiations, regardless, knowing I had spent my days combatting these phantoms. ”

“But you made it through?”

“Somehow. We reached an agreement, and he sent me back.”

“But he left you with the blood mark?” Albus asked.

“I guess he figured I would take care of it. But as you can see, it left me unsure of whether what I perceived was real. That’s why I didn’t…” He redirected his attention to Harry. “I apologize for how I cornered you in this hallway. I wasn’t in my right state of mind, and without you,” his voice seemed to come from deep within him, “without you, I would probably still be…. Thank you for taking action.”

“I…of course, Professor,” Harry responded. He looked down at his hands, and Remus reached out a hand to squeeze Harry’s shoulder.

Severus ran a hand across his face. “I might need a day or two to pull myself together, but I should be fine.”

Albus gazed at him gravely. “Severus,” he began, but Severus shook his head.

“I think some fresh air would help me clear my head. If you don’t mind,” he interrupted, slowing standing up. Sirius’s gaze followed him the entire way up, and Severus locked eyes with him for one transcendent second.

As he stood, blood rushed to his head and pain lacerated his size. He smothered his gasp and kept his face schooled. He had started to be too open, and he needed to remember how to shut it all down. He needed to remember how to hide. It was the only way he could survive this war.

He briskly made his way downstairs and briefly considered the front door. If he left that way, Sirius couldn’t follow him. If he went to the small backyard, Sirius would surely follow him, and then his hopes of hiding anything were smothered. He hesitated in the hallway.

He didn’t know if he could confront Sirius after what had happened. At the very least, he needed more time. He had to collect his thoughts, control his emotions, and figure out a way to diminish the severity of the past two weeks. Or he could let everything come out in one great swell of emotion, leaving himself exhausted and vulnerable but safe.

Indecision tore out him, and the pain slicing at his sides only made it worse. Cursing himself, he decided on the familiar option. He started for the front door, but before he could exit, Sirius’s voice stopped him.

“Mind if I come along?”

Severus fixed his gaze on the doorknob. Shame pulsated through him, “Thought you couldn’t.”

“I can’t, but Padfoot can. I know you don’t like dogs, but maybe you can make an exception.”

The words clogged in Severus’s throat, and he dug his nails into his palm. He could feel Sirius’s gaze piercing his back, but he couldn’t bring himself to turn around.

“Yeah, I’m coming with you,” Sirius declared, his footsteps echoing in the hallway. The sound gradually changed as Sirius morphed into a smaller, harrier creature, and Severus felt the nudge of a dog’s nose against his leg.

Digging his fingernails even deeper into his palm, Severus opened the door and stepped outside. Padfoot followed. Severus continued down the walkway and took the familiar route to a park he frequented when Order meetings became too much. It was a small park; two benches rested upon a small patch of grass, but it was surrounded by a thicket of trees that provided a sense of privacy. A pond that could be mistaken for a puddle provided something to look at, but its offering was meager. No one else ever seemed to be here, and Severus appreciated the silence.

He took a seat on one of the rotting benches and stared at the pond. After a moment, Padfoot jumped up next to him and lay his head on Severus’s lap. He let out a whine cuing Severus that he wanted to be pet.

Severus grudgingly began to stroke Padfoot. The dog whined in approval.

They remained like that for a while, as Severus gazed vacantly into the pond. His hand absently stroked Padfoot, who remained quiet. He desperately needed the time to think, and gradually, he began to vocalize his thoughts. Padfoot lay silently, giving no indication of the man within.

"I'm sorry," Severus began, unsure of what he was apologizing for, but still needing to speak those words. "I'm sorry how I reacted this morning. I'm sorry that I didn't tell you. I…these past two weeks have been hard for me, Sirius. They've torn me apart. They took what was precious to me and corrupted it. You. Lily. Albus. Regulus. All of you."

"The blood spell made me think you were with me. And it makes me think, made me think," at this point, Severus suppressed a sob. He curled over the dog and dug his hands into the soft fur.

"I hate this," he cursed, the pain giving way for anger. "I hate feeling this. Nothing ever gets fucking better." Padfoot huffed next to him, turning slightly so he could lick Severus's hands.

"Jesus, Sirius. Do you know how you've been treating me these past two weeks? As if I was nothing? As if I was worth than nothing – something to be hated and reviled and destroyed? I tried to ignore it. I tried to remember it wasn't you, but it didn't stop it from hurting. God, and one time they made you…the phantom treated me like I was…like he was one of my clients. "

He fell quiet, the memories overwhelming him.

Then, Severus let out a cold laugh. "And then, of course, there was Lily who would look at me with this *expression*, or, or Regulus who begged and begged for his life. Or Albus who started to resemble the Dark Lord and despised me. All a test, of course. To see if I was worthy. And I was. I always fucking survive. I had to kill a part of myself along the way, but I fucking survived."

Severus cried silently, squeezing his eyes tight against the tears. "But then how would you know? You're just a stupid dog."

When he fell silent, Padfoot lifted his head from his lap and pressed his head against Severus's. He licked at some of the tears, and Severus pushed the head aside, but with no real intent. The tears began to dry, and his face shuttered shut. He glanced up at the morning sun and sighed.

"I'll make it through this, Sirius. It helps that I can now remember it wasn't real, and I can see the clear differences. Like for you, your eyes were wrong. They were blank, dead eyes. It was the blood spell that distorted it. I'll be okay. I always am."

Padfoot whined, and Severus ran a hand along his spine. "You would make a much nicer cat," he whispered, and Padfoot barked in outrage.

They sat like that as the birds chirped around them and the insects buzzed. The sun warmed their skin, and Severus absent-mindedly petted Padfoot.

"I think I need to spend the day alone," Severus finally murmured. "But I'll be back tonight."

Padfoot sat up and lay one long, slobbering lick across Severus's face. Severus pushed the dog off the bench, and Padfoot barked offended. He stared wolfishly up at Severus, before turning around and bounding off.

Severus watched his retreating form. He remained a moment longer in the park, focusing on the moment around him. Then, with a deep breath, he apparated away.

Together

True to his word, Sirius didn't see Severus for the rest of the day. It was only after Sirius had retreated to his room after a tense dinner that Severus finally made an appearance.

His entrance cracked through the room, and Sirius startled from his book. He peered over his glasses at the man who, for the most part, looked put together. Silence awkwardly stretched across the room, and Sirius jumped towards an easy conversational topic.

"Molly gave me leftovers for you," Sirius said, gesturing towards a plate on the table. "She said I had to make you eat them. So please do for my sake."

Severus stood motionless before smirking. He sat down across from Sirius and began to eat. Sirius watched silently.

"The Dark Lord called me," Severus interjected mid-bite, and Sirius nearly fell out of his chair. Worry twisted in his stomach, and he felt sick.

"Are you okay?" he asked frantically, scanning Severus for injuries.

He nodded, and Sirius felt some measure of relief. "He wanted to congratulate me."

"And congratulation means he didn't hurt you?"

"No, thankfully. He gave me off two weeks instead. No duties, nothing. Free to do as I please."

Sirius stared at the man across from him. An unbidden grin broke across his face. "And what do you please to do?"

Severus arched an eyebrow. "I'll convince Albus that the best place for me to recover will be here with everyone. If you don't mind, of course."

Sirius snorted. "If it means two weeks staring at your ugly mug, I don't mind at all." He stood, pouring them both drinks. "To these two weeks," Sirius toasted, and the men enjoyed their drinks until Sirius glanced up over at Severus.

"How are you feeling?" he asked softly. The other man frowned.

"Better."

"Do you want to talk about it?" Sirius asked tentatively.

"Not particularly."

Sirius nodded, letting the subject rest. "If you ever need a doggy kiss from me again, you'll let me know, right?"

Severus huffed, his lips twitching upward. "I don't need you slobbering on me, Black."

Sirius grinned, and Severus swallowed, glancing down at his drink. His fingers gripped tightly around the glass, and he seemed...nervous? Sirius leaned forward, trying to figure out what was wrong.

“About last night…” Severus started, eyes closing momentarily. “That was real, right?”

“Yes. It was,” Sirius confirmed, shifting nervously in his seat.

“Oh,” Severus whispered.

Sirius cleared this throat, and doubt and fear began to spiral within him. "Sev, I don't want to presume..."

"You're not presuming, Sirius," Severus said quietly, and his gaze met Sirius's before jolting away. Sirius breathed deeply, trying to steady himself. Everything seemed to indicate a shared attraction and the fact that it was actually happening scared and excited Sirius in equal amounts.

“Then, you don’t mind if I do it again?” he asked, trying to hide his nerves. Severus glanced up to meet his eyes, and this time he held the gaze. Sirius struggled to read the emotion splayed across Severus's face, but it was too open and Sirius couldn't get a grasp on it.

“No, I don’t mind," Severus responded nebulously. "But you should..."

"Should what?" Sirius asked, stomach twisting. Severus glanced down and bit his lips.

"I'm...I have HIV. From when I was younger. I have potions so there's no symptoms and I won't spread it to you, but you should know. If you want to, you know, do that." Shame curdled his voice, and he looked like he was trying to roll into himself.

Dark rage descended on Sirius for a moment as he tried to once again conceptualize all of the suffering Severus must have experienced and the disgusting excuses of human filth that hurt him. He brought himself back to the moment, casting it aside.

Sirius sat forward, reaching out to lay his hand against Severus’s cheek. He moved slowly, and Severus lost himself in his dark eyes.

"Thank you for telling me, Sev. It's not a problem with me." Severus nodded, leaning his head into Severus's hand. "I'm just so glad you're safe," Sirius confessed, “I’m so glad you’re back here with me. No matter what. If I had known what was happening to you, I would have stormed up there and stabbed those vampires. I’m sorry I didn’t, and I’ll do whatever you need me to do to help. I’m here for you, Severus. Always.”

Severus shook at the words. “Sirius,” he said weakly. With a slow, steady movement, Sirius lay his lips against Severus’s mouth and gently kissed him.

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Severus’s eyes fluttered shut, and he leaned in to deepen the kiss, desperate to forget. Sirius obliged and slipped his tongue into Severus’s mouth. A low sound emitted from the back of Severus’s throat, and he responded in kind. He wanted so badly to forget, to give himself completely to Sirius and feel safe in that trust. He needed a way to block out the nightmare of his life, a way to pretend it was nothing but a bad dream, while *this* was real.

He desired Sirius so badly it scared him.

Sirius kissed him hard. He nibbled at his lips and used his tongue to elicit a moan from Severus. At that sound, he shuddered and moaned in kind.

“Severus,” he gasped, pulling back. Severus hummed and opened his eyes. His gaze landed on the bed, and Sirius’s eyes followed. “If you want, only if you want.”

“What do you want?” Severus asked, his voice low. Blood pounded through him and he felt light-headed.

“You,” Sirius whimpered. “I want you.”

Severus pulled Sirius into another kiss and navigated them towards the bed. They clumsily fell onto it, and Sirius laughed, nerves suddenly gone and eyes alight. Severus scowled.

They twisted around on the bed until they reached a more comfortable position. Before Severus had a chance to catch his breath, Sirius kissed him hard and moved to lay over top of Severus. His body heat emanated, and Severus acknowledged the hardness against his leg with an arched eyebrow. Sirius blushed, and the slightly ridiculous sight caused Severus to huff out a laugh.

“Geez, Sev, you’re embarrassing me,” Sirius mumbled against Severus’s cheek.

“Good. Now get these clothes off.”

Sirius kissed him again before his hands scrambled to undo the buttons of Severus’s shirt. He growled in frustration and almost ripped the shirt off. He succeeded in getting it off and stared down at Severus. His eyes traced hungrily over the pale chest, and he winced when he saw the angry remnants of the blood magic. He ran a finger around it. “Does this still hurt?”

“A little.”

Sirius stared sadly down at it, and Severus huffed. He didn’t want this to be the point. He sat up slightly and took Sirius’s shirt off. Now even, Severus enjoyed it much more. Sirius was toned; Severus knew he staved off the boredom by working out. However, what caught his attention was the tapestry of tattoos inked across Sirius’s skin. Some were crude as one would expect of prison tattoos, but others came out beautifully. He reached out and stroked a tattoo of a bird in flight.

Sirius’s eyes darkened, and he leaned down to kiss and bite at Severus’s collarbone and chest. His tongue flicked across the soft skin as he moved slowly lower. His mouth enveloped one of Severus’s nipples, but a hand pulled his head away.

“My neck,” Severus mumbled. Sirius’s breathing quickened, and the bulge strained against his pants. He complied, leaning down to kiss down Severus’s jawline and onto his neck. He sucked down, varying the pressure, and Severus moaned beneath him.

“Fuck, Sirius,” he whimpered, one hand coming up to clench the back of Sirius’s neck. Sirius continued, and Severus twisted beneath him, offering as much access as possible. He cried out when Sirius found a particularly sensitive area. Sirius smiled at the hardness pressing into his leg and decided to take the next step forward.

He sat up and kicked off his shoes and socks. Severus sat up and did the same, pulling at his pants. Sirius followed suit and they were soon left with nothing more than their boxers.

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Words became meaningless at this point. Instead, Sirius traced his tongue from his neck to his navel. He kissed intermittently, and Severus moaned beneath him. He paused as he reached

Severus's waistline. His erection had tented his pants, and Sirius palmed it. He applied the slightest bit of pressure and panted when Severus's hips jutted up to meet his hand.

"Sirius," Severus moaned. His words conveyed his desperation, so in one quick movement, Sirius pulled down the man's boxers. His erection sprung into the air, and Sirius watched in eager anticipation. Jesus, he hadn't fucked properly in ages. Very few people wanted to get intimate with a convicted felon, and Azkaban had been full of nothing but frantic handjobs in between the dementor's watch. He had been twenty one when he had last fully enjoyed himself, and he hoped he would last long enough to pleasure Sev.

"Sirius," Severus muttered again, gazing at him hazily. His face had become slack and relaxed and his mouth opened as he panted. Sirius leaned up, pressing a hard kiss against the mouth and digging his tongue into the warmth of the other. At the same time, he grasped Sev's erection in one hand and gently squeezed. Another moan escaped Severus's mouth.

"God, you're so beautiful," Sirius murmured, transfixed by the man beneath him. Lust mounted inside of him, and he began to slowly pump his hand. He watched every flash of pleasure enter Severus's irises, every moan escape his lips. His own cock ached painfully with want.

Sirius continued to move his hand up and down, thumbing the tip and varying the intensity. Severus moaned his name again and again, and the sound of it sent waves of sensation coursing through Sirius.

"No, Sirius…" Severus cried out, and Sirius hastily withdrew his hand. Severus yelped at the lack of contact and raised a hand to grasp at Sirius's shoulder. "Want you…" he forced out, his mouth working senselessly to form words. Sirius captured his mouth in another kiss. "Want you inside me," Severus finally made out, and the words threatened to topple Sirius over.

"Sev, we don't…"

"Don't argue with me, Black." The sound of his surname was ridiculously arousing, despite the fact that it was used as an insult for more than thirty years.

"Don't want to hurt you," Sirius admitted, his head dipping down to the nook of Severus's neck. Severus raised a hand to stroke it through Sirius's hair.

"You won't. I want this. I want you."

"Okay," Sirius mumbled, pressing a string of kisses against Severus's neck. "Okay." He muttered a spell to summon lube from the bathroom and grabbed the bottle. He hastily removed his boxers. He let out a short laugh. "Never thought we'd be naked in a bed together."

"Really?" Severus drawled. "You need to work on your imagination."

Sirius smirked. "Why? You fantasize about me?"

"You always did look good in that Quidditch uniform."

Sirius laughed again. "How dirty of you," he whispered, wrapping his hand around Severus's cock. He provided friction until Severus started moaning again. Then, just like before, he rapidly drew his hand away. Severus growled up at him.

Sirius only smiled and sat back between Severus's legs. The sight that greeted him nearly made him come, but he settled his breathing and focused on the lube. Sure, Severus could handle pain, but that didn't mean he wanted to hurt him. He rubbed lube against his aching cock, moaning

as his hand sent tendrils of pleasure spiking through him. Severus watched him hungrily.

"Like what you see?" Sirius quipped, and the look on Severus's face was all the answer he needed.

Properly lubed, Sirius rubbed some more on his fingers and traced his hand up Severus's thigh. He went slowly and could feel Sev quiver beneath him. Fuck, this was intoxicating.

He continued the path until he fingered the opening. With slow, gentle movements, he slid finger one, gasping at the tight heat. Severus squirmed and pressed down onto the finger. Sirius slipped another in, earning yet another gasp.

"Fuck, Sirius," Severus groaned, and the sound nearly made Sirius lose it. Instead, he slipped another finger in and curled them. Severus jerked, and Sirius used his other hand to pin his hips down. He straightened his fingers and curled them again and moaned as Severus tried, without avail, to jut his hips into Sirius's fingers.

"Oh no," Sirius scolded breathlessly. "You need to learn how to be patient."

"No, no I don't," Severus protested. "You need to learn how to not be a fucking tease."

"Like this?" Sirius asked, curling his fingers again and hitting what seemed to be Severus's prostrate as the reaction was obscene.

"Yes, yes, oh Sirius."

Sirius slipped his fingers out and lifted Severus's hips slightly. He positioned himself and slowly forced himself in. Severus cried out beneath him, and Sirius blacked out for a second as the tight warmth engulfed him.

"Move," Severus somehow made out, his voice shaky and desperate. Sirius complied, slowly moving in and out. The pleasure felt unreal, and he distantly wondered why this hadn't happened sooner. Severus writhed beneath him, moaning his name. Oh god, if Sirius wasn't careful he would come right now.

He steadied himself and began to push in harder and deeper. He quickened the pace and Severus moved to meet him. It took a few tries, but Sirius managed to hit the prostrate, and Severus let out another obscene moan. He cried out, his hands scrabbling at the sheets and his head thrown back exposing the neck that bared the marks of Sirius's earnest administrations. Sirius could feel himself dangerously close to climaxing as he continued to push himself in and out of Severus. The friction built, and lust screamed across his skin.

As he neared the climax, he wrapped one hand around Severus's cock and began to pump it desperately. He had to get Severus to climax; he wasn't so cruel that he would leave him hard and desperate. It took a lot less than Sirius had expected and with a few movements, the man orgasmed beneath him, keening and shuddering as his body yielded to pleasure. He clamped down around Sirius who felt himself fall over the precipice. His mind blanked as pleasure coursed through him and the orgasm erased any other sensation. Severus's name was on his lips as he came, and he collapsed onto him.

The hazy aftermath of the orgasm lingered in him, and Sirius dutifully rolled over so he wasn't crushing Severus. They remained touching, bodies pressed firmly against each other. Severus whimpered his name, and Sirius pressed languorous kisses against his cheeks and eyelids.

"We should do this again," Severus murmured, and Sirius kissed him in wholehearted

agreement.

"We have a full two weeks to ourselves. I'm sure we can find ways to entertain ourselves."

Severus smiled gently, his eyes firmly closed. He pulled himself closer to Sirius who watched him intently as his breathing evened and his face relaxed. He fell asleep entwined with Sirius, and Sirius couldn't help but feel a surge of overwhelming love for the man.

Somebody

"Good morning," Sirius crooned, brushing away hair form Severus's forehead. Severus huffed against him. "Sleep well?"

"I need a shower," he grumbled, pulling himself away from Sirius. He stood up and walked over to the bathroom, and Sirius's gaze followed him the whole way there.

"Mind if I join?" he teased, unsure if he was actually serious. A closed door answered him.

When they both finished getting ready, Sirius lightly kissed Severus. "How are you feeling?"

"Fine," Severus answered, voice bland. Sirius did a double-take and panic surged inside of him.

"If I did something wrong," he choked out quickly before the anxiety choked him. Severus looked up at him, his eyes widening.

"No, no. Last night was good. You were wonderful. It's just been a while for me, and I usually…"

"What?" Curiosity overtook the panic, and the anxiety shrunk back.

"Tell you tonight," Severus said, kissing Sirius. "But please don't worry about it. You would know if you did something wrong. Now, I don't know about you, but I'm starving. All I had to eat for the past two weeks was stale bread and tomato soup."

"Tomato soup?"

"I don't know why."

They walked to the kitchen and Sirius prepared another yogurt and granola bowl for them. It was still too early for any sane person to be awake, but they enjoyed the early morning together. They talked softly as everyone else slowly woke up.

Molly was the first to enter, and she looked pleased seeing them together.

"How was your night, my loves?" she asked, and the slightest twitch of Severus's expression sent a smile across her face.

"Molly," Severus protested, and Molly laughed.

"Don't try me, dear. I know you far too well for your liking," she teased, and as she walked past Severus, she ruffled his hair. As she made herself some toast, Tonks entered the kitchen too. "You're up early," Molly commented. Tonks shrugged.

"Figured I should get an early start. Good morning," she responded. She plopped down on one of the chairs and summoned an apple. They filled the time with light conversation, and Sirius noted how at ease Severus appeared.

Remus was the next to enter the kitchen, his gaze lingering on Tonks a heartbeat too long. Then Arthur followed, kissing Molly on her cheek. Hermione was the first of the kids to wake up. She did a double-take when she saw Severus but didn't comment. Instead, she yawned, grabbed a

muffin, and curled up in one of the chairs with a book firmly in hand.

"*Call Me by Your Name*?" Sirius asked.

Hermione glanced up. "You know it?"

"No, is it any good?"

Hermione nodded. "I love it. It's my third time reading it this summer."

"What's it about?" Sirius asked, mentally filing the book under his to reads.

"It's a love story between an Italian teenager named Elio and this American graduate student named Oliver who spends the summer with his family. It's really beautiful. If you want, you can borrow my copy when I'm finished."

Harry came in next, concern flitting on his face as he saw Severus. Sirius could feel the tension creeping back into Severus, and he wished he could comfort him.

"Good morning," Harry mumbled, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. He made some cereal and sat next to Hermione. The light conversation continued, but Severus seemed removed from it. He had stilled, and his face became blank. After about ten minutes, he stood.

"I have some potions I need to check," he explained, before quickly exiting. Sirius stared at the spot where he had just stood and regretted the absence. He could only hope Severus would return at some point during the day.

He didn't, and the day passed uneventfully. At the end of it, Sirius retreated to his room, showered, got ready for bed, and settled into his chair to read. About thirty minutes passed before Sirius heard the familiar crack.

"Sev," Sirius said, his mouth suddenly dry.

Severus sunk into the opposite chair. He remained rigid, and Sirius wondered how things could be just as, if not more, awkward.

"What are you reading?"

"*The Alchemist."* Sirius closed the book and placed it aside. Severus's gaze followed it.

"Any good?" he asked emotionlessly.

"What is it?" His tone was a little to blunt for his liking, but he didn't want to dance around this. If he did, it would only worsen.

Severus's grip tightened on the chair. Sirius frantically searched for an explanation for his behavior and landed upon last night's events. What went wrong? What did he do?

"We might have moved too fast. It's okay," Sirius finally decided, the silence eating into him. Severus jolted.

"No," he exclaimed angrily, his face contorting.

"No?" Sirius blinked, trying to read the man across from him.

"No. Don't treat me like this." Severus's voice cut harshly across the room.

“Like what?” Sirius asked, confusion mixing with dread.

“Like I can’t handle this. I can,” Severus glowered, his eyebrows furrowed.

“I…I didn’t mean it like that,” Sirius consoled, softening his voice. Severus’s knuckles turned white, and Sirius wanted to reach across and rub some color back in.

Instead, he sighed and ran his hands down his thighs. “I only meant…” he began, uncertain of how to broach the topic. He wished he could have pretended it never had happened, but to do so would be cruel. He didn’t want to be that kind of person, and he couldn’t, not after everything. “What happened to you when you were young…I can’t ignore it…”

Severus seemed to freeze. “It was a long time ago. It doesn’t matter.”

“Severus, I really want to believe you. I do. But I promised not to hurt you, and I can’t risk-,” Sirius attempted to explain before Severus cut him off.

“Oh, so you think I’m too weak to handle it?” he asked caustically. Sirius flinched.

“No, no, of course not.”

“Then what’s the problem? You no longer want me after you fucked me?” Severus spat, hatred marring his voice. Again, Sirius noted that hatred was not directed towards him.

Sirius stared at him aghast. “Jesus, no. No, don’t even say stuff like that.” He paused to collect himself. “It seems like something’s wrong. I have to know what it is,” he ended weakly. All of this felt off. Severus’s reactions were off-kilter and unexpected. Where Sirius had expected him to be clinical, he had turned to rage.

Severus barked out a laugh. “There’s nothing wrong with us wanting to fuck.”

The dismissiveness enraged Sirius, and before he knew it, he was on his feet and pacing around the room.

“I don’t want this to be just us fucking, okay? I can fuck anyone. I could have fucked you six months ago. But I don’t this to be like that!” The words flew out of his mouth, leaving him breathless.

Severus scoffed. “I believe you’re overreacting.”

“No. I’m fucking not. You’re underreacting.”

“I’m not,” Severus said, a haughtiness in his voice that only add gasoline to Sirius’s anger.

“You’re *not*? God, Sev, can’t see what I’m talking about? You were literally sixteen in here and thinking I was a fucking goddamned client, so how the hell can you not expect me to be worried about this?”

Severus' face had frozen. “If you don’t want to have sex with me-.”

“No, fuck that. I don’t want to trigger any of those memories. I don’t want you to think I’m one of those men. I don’t want you to feel like---do you understand?”

“So that’s it?” Severus hissed. “You think I’m too weak for this?”

“No!” Sirius shouted. “I think that if I want to make love with you, we can’t fucking rush it

or treat it like—like it's nothing. And you know it too."

Severus fell silent under Sirius's outburst. His hands had moved to his lap where they twisted in one another. The anger on his face looked like a cracked vase. He bit his lip, tearing at the flesh.

"It's much easier if you want to fuck me," Severus whispered, the fight lost.

Sirius exhaled deeply and slumped back into his seat. "If I wanted easy, I wouldn't have chosen you."

"I'm telling you, though. There wasn't just…I took people to bed in my twenties. It could be like that. Fun, easy, no strings attached."

Sirius thought bitterly to his teenage self who would have jumped at the opportunity. "I don't want to be another one of those people. I think we both deserve more."

Severus drew in a breath after a long moment. "Then you're right. You'll have to…be careful"

"Okay," Sirius said, relieved Severus finally seemed to be speaking honestly.

"Is it though?" Severus asked, his eyes downcast and the tone defeated. His hands remained clenched around the armrest, so Sirius reached out and gripped one. He entwined his fingers with Severus's. He leaned forward and kissed him lightly. Severus sighed underneath him.

Sirius pulled away, and they sat together silently. Sirius felt like a huge weight had been lifted from his chest; he had been dreading this conversation, but after hearing about Severus's past, he couldn't blindly barge into this. He reflected on the conversation, and a wry smile flashed across his face.

Severus had been watching him intently, so even though Sirius rid of it quickly, the man still caught it.

"What?" he inquired, eyes narrowing.

Sirius shook his head. "Nothing," he lied unconvincingly.

"Black…" Severus growled. With that tone, Sirius had no choice.

"Just, well, if you had told teenage me about," Sirius gestured around the room, "and that your twenties weren't spent locked in some damp dungeon somewhere, I would probably have had a psychotic break."

"You didn't think…?"

"You were remarkably asexual in my eyes."

Severus's eyebrows arched. "You were mistaken."

Sirius snorted. "Yeah, I figured. What *did* happen during your twenties, if you don't mind me asking?" Severus scoffed lightly, but his expression remained open. "I don't think I ever heard anything about it, especially since I was locked away on a barren rock for all it."

Severus thought for a moment, his eyes growing hazy. He sighed, meeting Sirius's gaze. "My twenties were quite something. Largely a mess on my part."

“Let me get some drinks for us before I vivaciously live through you,” Sirius said, standing and walking to the cabinet. He couldn’t believe his good fortune that Severus still wanted to talk to him after an argument like that. Sometimes Severus would get like this though, as if he owed Sirius. It troubled Sirius, but it was hard to deny the opportunity to learn more about the man.

While Severus had been remarkably open with him, it was still difficult to unravel strands of his life. Sirius had heard nothing about his twenties and early thirties and had only a minor understanding of his time as a Death Eater.

He craved Severus like he did a novel, and until the story was complete, he would never feel satisfied.

“Ok, so quick recap of my twenties. I was cold, hungry, sad, angry, imprisoned, and tortured a bit, you know the usual. Can’t say I really enjoyed them,” Sirius added, speaking quickly as he poured two drinks. He kept his back to Severus.

“I want to hear about it,” Severus said softly, and the response startled Sirius. Most people would leave it at his futile attempts to joke about the horror of Azkaban. That’s how he liked it anyway. It kept him from really having to think about it.

“It’s not the best story. But maybe after yours. We can compare notes,” Sirius deflected, turning around and handing Severus the drink. His fingers curled around the glass, and his dark eyes regarded Sirius.

“Yes. I would like that,” Severus said definitively, and Sirius suppressed his wince. He took a sip of his drink and tried to convince himself to keep himself open to the idea.

“First, you. So tell me, how did the great Severus Snape take on his twenties with no Marauders to annoy him every step of the way?”

Severus rolled his eyes. “Don’t make me rethink this.” Sirius grinned. “Let’s see,” Severus began, “the Dark Lord was destroyed, Albus saved me from Azkaban, paid for my training to become a Potions Master, and started me at this lovely job.”

“Ok. Now the details. I have to pretend I was there.”

“Fine,” Severus sighed. “The first two years I was a mess. I’m sure I don’t need to elaborate,” Severus said with an arched eyebrow, Sirius shook his head. “I poured everything I could into my training to distract myself from all of it. It didn’t exactly work but it got me through the worst of it.” He swallowed thickly. “I don’t think I have much more to say about that.”

Sirius nodded and reached out again to hold Severus’s hand.

“After that, I began work at Hogwarts. I was twenty-three, I believe. I was still grieving, and I-well, it’s actually a well-documented effect. After people escape cults, they struggle greatly to adapt to ‘normal’ life. They feel unmoored as they no longer have a belief system or common goal to work towards. That, in effect, happened to me. I didn’t know what to do, and I had no one to offer support.”

“So, as any twenty-three ex-cult member would do, I turned to some vices to fill the void.”

“Vices?”

“Sex, drugs, and rock and roll. Rather contrite now that I look back on it.”

Sirius's mouth dropped open. "Excuse me?" he asked.

"I would go to muggle concerts, get properly fucked up, and then tend to end up in someone's bed usually."

"I know what fucking sex, drugs, and rock and roll means. What I don't understand is that *you*?" Sirius gestured helplessly at Severus.

Severus tilted his head. "Yes?"

"*You* did that?" Sirius felt flabbergasted.

"That's what I said."

"And fuck, I thought I was cool."

Don't flatter yourself, Black," Severus smirked, before sobering again. "As I was saying, I got very into the muggle music scene for about a year and a half. All sorts of bands – Queen, Madonna, Blondie, Springsteen, and all sorts of terrible ones too. It didn't particularly matter to me, but it was nice when the bands were actually pretty good."

"You saw Queen?" Sirius spluttered. James and he used to blast their music in their room.

Severus nodded. "Yes, they were rather good."

"James and I used to listen to them," Sirius explained, and Severus nodded.

"I met Freddy Mercury, the lead singer," he added as an afterthought.

Sirius choked on his drink. "What?" he exclaimed, unable to believe the sentence with which Severus had relayed with complete casualness.

"I met him at one of the after-parties. We…talked."

"No," Sirius stated. "No fucking way."

"He was an interesting conversationalist."

"You slept with him," Sirius said dumbfounded, needing to say the words in order to begin to process any of it.

"Yes, I suppose I did."

"You slept with Freddy Mercury."

Severus arched one eyebrow. "I didn't know you would be so impressed."

"Are you fucking kidding me? How could I not be? Freddy Mercury was…he was Freddy Mercury!"

Severus smirked, clearly amused.

"I can't believe this," Sirius muttered. He pressed his palm against his leg. "You're going to have to give me about a month to process this, so you might as well continue."

"Where was I? Oh yes, I saw a lot of bands and took far too many drugs. I didn't trust

alcohol, not after what it had done to my father, and I could never even look at heroin. Cocaine, molly, LSD, acid, shrooms, weed were all on the table. Coke especially. That with loud music was the closest I could get to not having to feel anything."

"From that, sex was bound to happen. I had a very warped sense of my body and who it belonged too, but it did give me a degree of control I craved after… it wasn't healthy what I was doing, but I didn't know anything else. There was no one to tell me…" he broke off, twisting his hands together.

"It's interesting," Severus said, growing quieter, "victims of ah, sexual abuse tend to either become incapable of having an erection or become very easily aroused. I read that somewhere. I happened to fall in the latter," he said bitterly.

Severus let out a breath after a few moments of silence and glanced at Sirius. "And I was trying to teach on top of all of this."

"Certainly a lot to multitask," Sirius added, struggling to reconcile the man in front of him with the story. He could only image how the kids would respond if they found out their dreaded professor had spent his twenties.

Severus rolled his eyes, "Quite. In retrospect, it's remarkable I managed to pull it off. Back then, it wasn't so impressive or amusing." Severus peered intently at Sirius. "Have you ever done drugs?"

Sirius thought for a moment. "Some weed when I was a teenager. But no, nothing else."

"Don't. No matter how they make you feel, it isn't worth it. They take and take and give you nothing in return," he warned somberly. "That's how I was at twenty-five. With nothing."

Sirius winced sympathetically. "We had something in common." Severus stared at him for a moment, and Sirius looked away. "Then what?"

"Minerva noticed. She found me stumbling through Hogwarts out of my mind too many times for her liking. She took care of me, but she insisted I go to rehab. You know how frightening she can be."

Sirius thought back to all the times she had sternly lectured them after a prank and winced again. "Yeah, so you went then?"

"No. I refused. I resented it, resented the help, and didn't trust anyone enough to pull me through it. I was…in a bad state. On top of all the other shit in my life, I figured drugging myself to death might not be the worst way to go," Severus trailed off, shame overtaking his face. He bit his lip and rubbed his hand against the armrest. "Minerva wouldn't let that stand. She and Albus, for whatever reason, refused to give up. So they thought of the one person even more terrifying than them."

"Molly," Sirius stated, leaning back in his chair. Here was the root of their relationship.

"Molly," Severus repeated. "She had, ah, dealt with addiction in her family. She knew what to do, what *I* would do. She made it her personal mission to bring me back from the edge. She was one of the first people who was," Severus swallowed, "kind to me. Truly kind to me. She took care of me, didn't let all of my bitterness and cruelty deter her. She saw me for what I was and what I could be, and because of that, I couldn't hide from her. It took a year with her on me and I stopped using. She stuck with me through it all. I owe her more than I could ever repay her." Severus

paused, his eyes closing. “She was a mother to me, Sirius. And coming from a family like mine, I…it’s hard to describe how much that means.” Severus broke off, falling quiet.

Sirius tilted his head, the words striking deep. Having someone like that, well fuck, he understood how Severus must have felt.

“I’ve been clean for nine years now,” Severus stated, a hint of pride in his voice.

“Good,” Sirius said, reaching out and stroking Severus’s hair. “I’m happy for you.” Severus grabbed Sirius’s hand and pressed a kiss onto it.

“Those were my twenties,” Severus said. “Thirties have been much better so far. I got a cat. Learned how to play the piano. Won some awards for my potions. Took up yoga. Traveled a bit. Good things, for the most part.”

“Yoga?”

“Don’t give me that look. It helps.”

“Doesn’t that mean you’re really flexible?” Sirius asked mischievously, and Severus batted his hand away.

“Now you,” Severus redirected. “I want to hear about you.”

Sirius laughed. “Nah, you don’t. It’s not a good story.

“And my addiction was?”

Sirius shrugged. “It had some good parts.”

Severus stared at him scandalized. “Good parts?”

“You got to sleep with Freddy Mercury. That’s a good part. The most action I got was some hurried handjobs when the dementors weren’t breathing down our neck. Not nearly as sexy.”

“And?” Severus pressured.

“And what?” Sirius shot back caustically. “And what? You want to hear about the interrogation? The trial? The torture? All those fucking years locked in a cell?”

Severus fell silent and took a sip of his drink. “Yes,” he said quietly, meeting Sirius’s eyes. Sirius wanted to latch on to his anger, but looking at Severus’s open expression, the trust and expectation, the anger melted away, leaving exhaustion.

“I’m sorry. It’s not a good story,” Sirius repeated, his shoulders hunching forward. “Trust me.”

“I know. I’m not asking for that.”

Sirius swirled his drink. “Fuck,” he muttered, throwing the entire drink back and wincing at the sharp taste of alcohol. “Fine, fine. What do you want to know?”

“Start from the beginning. The interrogation,” Severus guided, and Sirius grimaced.

“Well, you know what happened with Pettigrew, that fucker. The Aurors picked me up not too long after. Threw me in a small room and left me there for hours. Finally Scrimegeour and

Sharp came in. Asked me why I betrayed the Potters. Asked me when I joined Voldemort. Why I had betrayed everyone. Why I had killed all those muggles. Crucioed me every time I insisted I didn't." Sirius paused and laughed bitterly. "You know how it is. I could only last so long."

Severus reached out and rested his hand on Sirius's knee. "Yes. I do."

"Fuck," Sirius cursed again. "Do you think you could have…" he trailed off, embarrassed of his need to ask and frightened of his answer. Of course Severus wouldn't have cratered. If only he had been stronger, maybe all of this could have been avoided.

"No,' Severed declared. "I couldn't. I would have eventually…even now, Sirius, I still beg him to stop."

Sirius relaxed his shoulders slightly. "Okay, okay, yeah. I couldn't either. They got their confession. Put me on trial, a whole big show because they wanted to make an example of me. The Gryffindor who had betrayed his best friend and James had only just died. Everything hurt, Sev. Every time they said his name," Sirius's voice cracked as he got uncomfortably close to the thing he promised himself never to think of.

Severus leaned forward. "It was the same for Lily. People talked about her all the time, and I couldn't stand it."

Sirius shifted uncomfortably. "You loved her," he said, more of a statement than a question.

"Yes," Severus admitted, his voice barely audible.

"We always thought so. James and I."

"I…" he began, his grip tightening on Sirius's knee.

"Yeah?"

"I always thought you and Lupin…"

Sirius laughed, smiling at the idea. "In another life, yes. Without a doubt. But for whatever reason, it didn't work out in this one."

Severus nodded. "Another life. It's a nice thought."

"In another life, we could have been the star-crossed lovers of Hogwarts," Sirius joked, the idea filling him with delight. Severus grimaced.

"I feel very bad for that Severus."

"Why?" Sirius asked, overplaying his astonishment. "I would have been an excellent boyfriend."

"That would have been the problem."

Sirius thought for a moment and shrugged lightly. "You would have loved it."

"Maybe," Severus admitted. "But I doubt it." Sirius grinned and Severus rolled his eyes. "Enough about our other lives. What happened after the trial?"

Sirius's smile instantly disappeared. "Put me in my cell. Left me there."

“And?” Severus prompted, his dark eyes searching Sirius’s.

“And twelve years later I escaped.” Sirius faked a yawn and gestured towards the bed. “Want to pick it up tomorrow?” he asked, knowing he wouldn’t.

Severus glanced at the bed, thinking. “No,” he finally stated. “No, I’m not tired. What happened those twelve years, Black?”

“Black?” Sirius asked, amused and happy to redirect the conversation.

“Yes. Black, now what happened?” Severus growled, frustrated. He stared at Sirius unflinchingly, and Sirius wavered between laughing it off or bluntly rejecting him.

“Some things are better left forgotten, Snape.”

“Really? I would have never realized,” Severus scathingly replied.

Sirius snorted. “Great. We’re on the same page.” He started to stand, closing the conversation.

“You owe it to me,” Severus said, his eyes flashing.

Sirius shook his head. “Maybe. But there’s nothing for me to say. Nothing I can say. Azkaban was Azkaban. It happened and it’s over. Now, I’m tired and want to sleep.” He walked over to the bed, quickly changed into his pajamas, and climbed in under the covers. A stickiness coated his chest, but he ignored it. There was nothing he could do. He would happily rehash any part of his life, but not Azkaban,

It was a few minutes before Severus joined him. He stayed distant, his body a slight dip in the mattress. Sirius thought regrettably of how the night could have ended up if he hadn’t been such an ass.

He couldn’t bring himself to speak again and fell into an uneasy sleep. When he woke, Severus was gone.

Secret

Severus napped intermittently as he lay out on the grass. Birds chirped around him, and a slight breeze ruffled the leaves. The small pond made no sound except for an occasional splashing of a fish. Here, he could be at peace.

The afternoon passed by lazily, and Severus allowed his thoughts to slip away. For a few hours, he would forget the war and his past. He would ignore his anger from the previous night. Instead, he focused on his breathing and the life circling around him. After two weeks in hell, he deserved some measure of peace.

He distantly wished for Sirius to be here with him, but the thought slipped away as he thought angrily of the man's actions the previous night. Severus had bared his soul yet again, but Sirius had refused to reveal his. He resented how that had left him vulnerable.

Even if Azkaban was a difficult topic for Sirius to discuss, Severus had managed to air out his trauma. Trauma, in some ways, that was arguably worse than Sirius's. And now Sirius refused to talk about it? Either Sirius had played Severus remarkably well or the man was too stupid and stubborn to see his hypocrisy.

Severus would make Sirius talk about Azkaban. He would get all the gritty, painful details, even if he had to use every dirty trick in his book.

The afternoon faded away, and Severus picked himself up, brushing stray strands of grass from his hair. He twisted around, apparating away. He landed with a thud outside of Grimmauld Palace. Molly had insisted that he join them for dinner, and though Severus dreaded the discomfort that would follow, he couldn't refuse her again.

Molly smiled kindly when she saw Severus and gestured him to a seat. Everyone else was engaged in a light chatter, and Severus let himself fade into the background. He glanced over at Sirius who was talking with Harry. Something tight twisted inside of him, but he shoved it aside.

Dinner passed comfortably. Severus was the first to leave, sneaking up to Sirius's room. He sat down and grabbed one of Sirius's book to absentmindedly flip through it. About thirty minutes passed before the door opened and Sirius strolled in.

"Hey," Sirius said, sitting across from Severus. "How was your day?"

Severus shrugged. "Fine. I sat by a pond and napped."

Sirius smiled. "Glad to see you're taking full advantage of your days off," he teased, and Severus rolled his eyes. "So," he continued, "what's your choice of drink tonight?"

"Tequila," Severus said nonchalantly, and Sirius raised an eyebrow.

"Quite the choice." Sirius stood, pouring two glasses of the drink. He summoned some lemonade to dilute the flavor.

Their conversation lightly retraced previous ones as they talked about Harry and Hogwarts and the upcoming school year. Severus easily slipped into the motions of conversation but remained on edge. Sirius had been sipping on his drink, his eyes growing a little hazy. He had to wait until Sirius was at ease and pliable. Only then could he direct the conversation how he needed.

He finally decided the moment was right.

"Sirius," he said softly, and Sirius smiled lazily. "You never finished telling me about Azkaban."

A frown crossed Sirius's face. "Don't want to. It's a bad place."

"What happened, Sirius?" Severus pressured, leaning forward. He maintained eye contact, and Sirius blinked rapidly.

"Bad stuff," he said, his eyes distant. "Spent a lot of time as Padfoot so I didn't have to see it." Sirius clenched his eyes shut, and Severus waited. "The other prisoners there were fucking crazy. Had an hour a day outside where we would all stand together and fuck, they scared me shitless. But I had a reputation already so people let me be. I saw what happened to the people that didn't, so thank god Pettigrew committed such a terrible crime. Only protection I had."

Severus nodded and remained quiet. Sirius took another sip of his drink. His eyes became unfocused for a moment.

"I went through the war years unscathed, so Azkaban was the first time I was really tortured, so I guess I can empathize with you. Probably not as fucked up as Voldemort, but pain is pain, isn't it? It did provide a distraction though from everything else. I was so cold all the time. And then the Dementors," Sirius shuddered. His breath caught in his throat. He took another drink.

"That was the worst part, Sevie. Those fucking Dementors. God, you would be miserable there. They make you only think of the bad, the painful. You fixate on your mistakes. Realize how terrible of a person you are." Sirius huffed a laugh. "You would have already thought that. But I didn't. I thought I was a good person. I was a fucking arrogant ass. But not anymore," Sirius said brokenly. He glanced down at his drink. "How much tequila did you put in this?" he asked.

"It was you, Sirius," Severus replied quietly. He hung onto every word.

Sirius shrugged. "I must have put a lot…" he trailed off, starting at Severus confused. "What were we talking about again?"

"The Dementors."

"Oh yeah," Sirius winced. "Those were fucking bad. You know," he began, halting. "I don't think I should say this," he slurred. "But maybe I should."

"Sirius," Severus comforted, and Sirius slumped into his seat.

"It's a secret, Sev. Shh," Sirius whispered. "I don't even know it, so you can't tell me."

Severus brushed the confusion aside. Sirius was evidently drunker than either had anticipated. He wasn't going to make perfect sense.

Sirius leaned forward, his eyes wide. "Promise me you won't tell anyone."

"I promise."

Sirius started to bounce his leg and his voice dropped into a whisper. "I loved him. And that's why it was so, so bad with the dementors."

Severus startled. He was expecting an atrocity, not a love confession. "Him?" he asked,

keeping his voice as gentle as possible.

Sirius giggled in a high-pitched tone. His eyes were still too wide. “James. I really, really loved him. But, shh, Sev, you have to keep it a secret. No one can know. Especially not me.”

Severus’s eyes widened and he sat back hard in his chair. The words took the breath out of him. “James?” he repeated, unsure of what else to say.

Sirius head dipped forward before he corrected himself. “You weren’t the only one harboring a love for your best friend. Or had to deal with losing-” he slurred, dropping the sentence.

“Sirius,” Severus replied, his brow furrowing. Sirius leaned forward and lifted a finger. He wagged it at Severus.

“Promised you wouldn’t say anything.”

Severus paused, but pushed ahead. “Am I the only one who knows?” he asked. Sirius blinked and frowned.

“James didn’t. Couldn’t ever do that to…him. Remus, no. I don’t ever, *ever* think about it, so I don’t know either. So just you, Sevie.” His voice dropped and he leaned forward. “You have to take it to your grave.”

Severus fell silent, attempting to process the words. Potter and Sirius had been close friends, no one could deny that. But Sirius was always off with girls. There was never even a hint of a rumor of anything else.

But then again wasn’t that how it worked? Having a secret so terrifying that you had to do everything to bury it? Didn’t Severus do just that when he slept with people in his twenties, desperately trying to pretend he was deserving of affection, but burdened with the knowledge that he wasn’t?

Of course, Sirius would run from something like this. The Black family was less than forgiving towards people who couldn’t continue blood lines. Severus had encountered plenty of it in his Death Eater years. It was possibly the only thing more unforgivable than sympathizing with the muggles; at least, you would still have children.

For Sirius to invite upon himself- Severus shuddered at the thought of it. Some pureblood families would take extreme measures against a perceived atrocity like this, and the Black family certainly fell into that category.

Severus winced as he thought of Reggie, but immediately dismissed the thought.

So yes, it would make sense that Sirius could be in love with Potter, yet unable to do anything. Even if he was willing to take that risk, the decision could just as easily harm Potter. Severus grimaced when he thought back to how his fellow Slytherins resented the perfect Potter but would have abhorred him if they thought he was fucking the Black heir. They would have made an example out of him; he would have become a target.

It was easier to value the friendship, value what the person had already given, yet never ask for more. Severus had done the same with Lily.

But, Jesus, he knew how much it hurt.

Then to have that hurt confounded by the Dementors and multiplied by the fact that the person you loved had *died*, and that you held some responsibility for their death. Severus may have told the Dark Lord the prophecy, but he remembered that Sirius was the one to convince them to use Pettigrew.

Severus couldn't blame Sirius for wanting to forget. Wanting to pretend it never happened. He would have tried the same with Lily if he didn't have to repent for his mistakes.

He felt an overwhelming sympathy for the man. They were more alike than Severus could have ever imagined, and the thought cut deep.

"Sevie?" Sirius asked, resting his head in his hands. "Think…think I'm gonna puke?"

Severus snapped out of his thoughts, summoned a bucket, situated it, and pulled Sirius's hair back.

Sirius did indeed hurl, and Severus filed it under potential side effects. Or a sign not to mix alcohol with potions.

He knew it had been wrong of him, a betrayal of trust, but he couldn't shake the need for information. It was the only thing that kept him alive. And while he knew he didn't need to use his tactics on Sirius, the Dark Lord's lessons never left him. Not completely. So yes, his diluted veritaserum was a step too much. It was a betrayal, but *only* if Sirius found out. Severus had years of experience to draw upon to prevent exactly that from happening.

Severus wiped Sirius's vomit from his mouth and kissed him on top of his head. "Let's go to bed, puppy. You'll feel better in the morning."

"Sevie," Sirius repeated and promptly vomited again.

Morning

Chapter Notes

Hello! A quick chapter here, but hopefully a good one. There is smut towards the end as a heads up.

I've also written about 40 pages of a college AU with these two - the idea struck me one day and wouldn't leave. I'll be uploading it in the next month or so, so keep an eye out for that :) It's been very fun to write (a welcome break from something as heavy as this) and I've been able to draw on my experience from college which is always interesting.

As always, enjoy!

Sirius woke up with a pounding hangover. Someone pushed something against his lips, and Sirius drank it without thinking. It was bitter, and he gagged at it. The hand stroked his cheek and pulled away.

Sirius lay there aching, but gradually the headache began to fade. His body started feeling like someone had run a car over it instead of an 18-wheeler.

“Severus?” he croaked. The man shifted beside him.

“It’s a hangover potion. Should start to feel better soon.”

“Fuck,” Sirius muttered, “How much did I drink?”

“Too much,” Severus stated dryly, and Sirius frowned at him. God, they had talked last night. Talked about Sirius. About Azkaban. About, about-no, he didn’t want to think of that.

“Fuck,” he said again as he thought back to everything he had said. What had possessed him to fucking reveal so much? He had told Severus everything. Stuff he had never wanted to think of again.

It must have been the tequila. The fucking tequila.

“Feeling better?” Severus asked, and Sirius grimaced in reply.

“Don’t let me do that again.”

Severus hummed and stroked Sirius’s hair again. “I would prefer not to have you vomit on me again.”

Sirius frowned. “Fuck, I’m sorry,” he forced out. Severus smiled down at him.

“I’ve shown up in much worse states. You have nothing to worry about.”

Sirius pulled a face and tried to sit up. His head started whirling so he stopped trying. “Last night,” he began, his tongue like cotton in his mouth. His entire body ached and his headache

didn't seem to be going anywhere fast.

Severus ran his hand through Sirius's hair. "It's okay."

Sirius began to shake his head, grimacing. "I…that wasn't…I shouldn't have said those things."

"It's okay, puppy," Severus responded firmly. "You're hungover. The potion needs about thirty minutes to work, so until then, just rest."

Sirius sighed, sinking back into the bed. He shut his eyes and tried to think past the thrumming in his head. It proved difficult, so he let his thoughts slide away.

Something niggled at the back of his mind at how Severus seeing Sirius in an inebriated state should never have pushed him to reveal so much, but he tried not to think too hard on it. It wasn't something worth losing Severus over, and he pushed the thought out of his mind.

When Sirius felt the hangover pass, he pulled himself out of bed and cleaned himself up in the bathroom. Severus hadn't left yet and was reading over papers in the chair. Sirius sat opposite of him, and Severus glanced up, offering a thin smile.

"What are you reading?" Sirius asked, slumping in the seat.

"Potion recipes."

"Which ones?" Sirius asked absent-mindedly, glancing around the room. He hadn't ever taken to potion-making, but he could feign some interest.

"Wolfbane, mostly. Want to see if I could make it more effective."

The words jolted Sirius and he sat up, focusing on Severus. "For Remus?"

"More or less. I do owe him for getting him fired."

"Yeah, you do," Sirius agreed, "Do you think you can?"

Severus thought for a moment. "The last change to the potion was about thirty years ago by McKale. It's been kept the same since, so I should be able to update it. There are a few ingredients I could possibly add, but I need to work on it."

"That would be great if you could do that for him."

"Yes, I figured," Severus said, turning back to the potion. He scribbled a few notes, ignoring Sirius's gaze.

"I was terrible at potions," Sirius finally said. He itched for a conversation, especially one that would feel normal.

"I know. Too impatient," Severus muttered. "You can't rush it."

"I also hated how you just followed the instructions. It was mechanical."

Severus shook his head. "You went about them wrong. Potion making isn't baking, it's cooking. You can add your own touch."

Sirius furrowed his brow in confusion. "Thought that caused the potions to blow up?"

“Only if you’re an idiot about it. You wouldn’t dump in a cup of salt when you need a pinch, but you could easily add a dash of pepper.”

Sirius thought about it for a moment. “So that’s what you’re doing now?”

Severus glanced up from the pages. “Yes,” he sighed. “To continue with the cooking analogy, it’s like taking a bowl of pasta and adding cheese and tomato sauce. Not necessary for the base, but makes it much tastier. I take this potion and figure out how to make it better, whether it be changing the method or the ingredients. I may add meat this time or cook it for longer, in the hope that it tastes better.”

“Is that what you teach?” Sirius asked, reflecting on his classes. Slughorn had listed the potion and punished any deviations.

“To the upper-level students. Or students who have a taking for potions. One can’t learn how to cook without following some sort of recipe at first.”

“I wish I had learned it like that. I might have liked it then.”

“Possibly.” Severus’s gaze sharpened and he looked up at Sirius. “You have a rebellious streak, which means you would be good at looking past the recommended steps. You read a lot, which has hopefully fueled some sort of creativity in you. You could be rather good at it.” Severus thought for a moment. “I could teach you.”

Sirius huffed out a laugh. “I think I would actually really like that. But you’ve got too much to worry about right now than if I’m going to accidentally blow myself up.”

Severus looked posed to argue but nodded. “When I have less to do, I would be happy to.”

Sirius smiled. “And I would love to learn. I have heard you’re quite the intimidating teacher,” Sirius added, his tone jovial.

Severus rolled his eyes. “Only to students who don’t try.”

“Oh, don’t worry. I’m very eager,” Sirius added, winking. Severus blinked. He glanced back down at his papers, before setting them aside.

“I should hope you are,” he replied, shifting in his seat.

Sirius smirked, leaning forward. “I can’t wait to learn all I can under you, professor.” He added emphasis to the final words. The words seemed to affect Severus as he swallowed hard and ran his hands down his thighs. A heady feeling overcame Sirius. “Where should we start?”

“I think the basics would suffice,” Severus said, drawing in a deep breath.

“Oh?” Sirius asked, licking his lips.

“Yes,” Severus replied, his eyes darkening. “Pay close attention,” he ordered.

“Don’t think that should be a problem, professor.”

Severus clenched the chair at the word, spots of color appearing on his cheeks. He steadied himself and then stood up, peering down at Sirius.

“Sit up straight,” he ordered, and Sirius did so, a thrill running through him. “Spread your legs,” he added, his voice heated. Sirius complied.

Severus looked down at him for a second longer. “I expect you require a demonstration.”

“Yes, professor,” he whispered.

“Watch closely,” Severus instructed, and Sirius nodded, anticipation building within him.

Severus came down to his knees and sat between Sirius’s legs. Sirius couldn’t help the hitch in his breath. Severus reached out, unbuttoning Sirius’s pants. He rested his hand on the fabric covering Sirius’s hardening cock.

“Now, Mr. Black, I will begin the demonstration. I will not tolerate any distraction, do you understand?”

“Yes,” Sirius whispered weakly. “I understand.”

Severus pulled out his cock and ran his hand along its length. Sirius clenched the arms of the chair, and he breathed deeply. Severus repeated the action until Sirius was completely hard and panting.

“Professor,” he muttered.

“Yes, Mr. Black?” Severus asked, composed. “Are you finding the lesson interesting?”

“Yes, yes,” Sirius stuttered. “Please, please continue.”

“Very good,” Severus responded, bringing his face closer to Sirius’s cock. He closed the distance, running his tongue around Sirius’s cock. Sirius watched him through half-lidded eyes and moaned when Severus brought his lips to the tip and took it into his mouth.

“Fuck,” Sirius moaned, causing Severus to withdraw.

“Language,” he chastised.

“So-sorry, professor.”

Severus accepted his apology by returning his mouth to its previous location. His tongue traced around it and he swallowed, causing Sirius to jerk in his chair.

“Professor,” he moaned, lightly grabbing hold of the man’s head. Severus continued, his mouth hot and warm and beyond pleasurable. Sirius tried to stifle his moans, but it was to no avail. It was a sin the way Severus moved his tongue.

The orgasm was fast-approaching, and it took little more from Severus to cause him to cum. The pleasure was intense, causing him to throw his head back and moan loudly. The pleasure gradually subsided, but Severus had brought himself up to Sirius’s level and kissed him openly and wetly. Sirius could taste himself on Severus, and it intoxicated him.

He couldn’t stop himself as he took the man’s face into his hands to kiss him even deeper. He sucked in air through his nose, unwilling to break the contact.

Severus pulled away, and Sirius begrudgingly let him. They remained close, foreheads pressed together. They breathed in unison until Severus pressed a quick kiss against his lips and stood up. He rubbed at his mouth, his lips glistening.

“Would you like me to show you what I learned?” Sirius asked hoarsely. Severus tilted his head.

“I have to see how well you were paying attention, don’t I Mr. Black?” he replied, his voice low.

Sirius slipped out of the chair and rested on his knees. He hesitated for a moment but overcame it to unzip the man’s pants. Severus leaned back against the table, his head dropping.

Sirius repeated Severus’s move by taking his cock in his hands until it was hard. Then, glancing up to meet Severus’s gaze, he brought it to his mouth. Severus whimpered out his name, and Sirius redoubled his efforts.

The man’s breathing grew heavy, and he let out quiet sighs. He whimpered Sirius’s name again before gasping and orgasming. He kept his eyes shut as he rested against the table and relaxed.

“C’mere,” he whispered, and Sirius obliged. He winced at the ache in his knees as he stood. Now standing across from the man, Sirius placed his hands on Severus’s hips and drew Severus in for another kiss. This time it was gentle and open, and Severus brought one hand to Sirius’s neck. Sirius smiled, pulling away to kiss Severus’s nose.

“Good morning,” he murmured, moving in to place another kiss on his nose.

Severus scowled but pulled Sirius in for another kiss.

“Any plans for today?” Sirius asked lightly.

“Why? You have something in mind?”

“I’m sure I can think of something if you stick around,” Sirius said, smiling. Severus rolled his eyes but didn’t try to pull away.

“Really?” he asked dryly.

“Only if you’re interested,” Sirius prefaced, his smile fading. He thought back to the conversation they had only a few days ago. “I don’t want to make you feel-“

Severus cut him off with a kiss. “I still have much to teach you, Mr. Black.”

“Well good thing I love to learn, Professor.”

Closeness

Chapter Notes

Hi everyone! Another update for a nice dash of escapism.

I'm sure all of you are aware of Coronavirus, and I wish you all the best wherever you might. It has just started to impact where I live - the University I attend has closed for the rest of the semester, all planned activities have been canceled and lot of places are starting to close down. I'm back home, and so far healthy, but it's a crazy, surreal time to be living in.

One bright side - I'm sure I'll have far too much time to write. So I'll try to maintain a constant update rate - for this story or others - to provide some escapism as we all gradually quarantine and go insane in our houses. If you want to reach out and chat - please feel free! We can talk about anything and try to stave off some of the boredom.

Otherwise, please enjoy and stay healthy

Despite the misery of those sixteen days, the past weeks had more than made up for it. It even made those twelve years in Azkaban seem almost worth the wait.

Sirius wanted to curse his past self for not taking advantage of any opportunity he could have had with Severus.

He had taken his fair share of partners to bed in his late teens and early twenties. Most had been good, some great, but none had been like Severus. Sirius could blame those twelve years of forced abstinence, but deep down he knew better. Severus was incredible in bed and the fact that he loved the man didn’t help.

Sirius supposed it made sense in a sick sort of way that Severus was so good, and it pained him to think of it. He could only guess at how deep those scars ran, and the last thing he wanted was to hurt him inadvertently by invoking those memories.

Fortunately, Severus seemed to enjoy it as much as Sirius, dispelling some of those doubts. He was passionate and amused and seductive, and he loved to run his hands through Sirius’s hair and kiss him slowly and moan his name. Sirius was quick to tease and laugh in bed, and Severus would respond with mock annoyance that lightened the mood.

Sirius also took the greatest care to avoid hurting him. Constraining Severus’s hands was a mistake Sirius wouldn’t make again, and there was no pretending at angry, aggressive sex. It needed to be sweet and loving and light, the antithesis to the rest of their lives.

Sirius didn’t know how or why he had lived without this, and it took all his strength not to kiss Severus every time their gazes met. He hadn’t felt this much since…no. Sirius didn’t think of that anymore.

Severus seemed happier too. His assignment had taken a toll on him, and Sirius would catch him staring vacantly, his brow slightly furrowed. Sirius would kiss him out of it, and Severus

would pull himself close. He never talked about it, but Sirius would still whisper comforting words to him. Gradually, Severus would relax and take Sirius to bed.

In fact, the sex had cut into a lot of their conversations. Sirius itched to talk more about Severus's past. There were still missing gaps, and while Sirius wouldn't make him talk, he was desperate to ask. They hadn't fully addressed their emotions either. Sirius's confession still hung in the air, and while their actions spoke to their emotions, they needed to communicate it with each other. Sirius figured they would both love to have that certainty, but he worried about digging into their romantic pasts and bringing those emotions to light.

They hadn't broached Azkaban again, and shame caught in his throat whenever he thought of the conversation. It had slipped out, searing his mouth and inspiring waves of panic. He managed to keep the panic attacks at bay when he could focus on Severus, but without them, they tightened his muscles and shrank the room, leaving him breathless and frigid. It was better for Severus not to know, and he recognized that Severus should never have pressed him on *that* when he couldn't control himself but the thought had too many implications and he didn't want to think of it.

Instead, he wanted to think of Severus and the way his lips twitched up in a smirk and the smoothness of his skin. He wanted to pass these weeks in a hazy bliss and temporarily forget the horror they had dredged up. Severus seemed to want the same.

So Sirius pushed off the conversations he knew were coming. He didn't consider the implications of their relationship, didn't dwell on what the Dark Lord had done and was doing to Severus (the two weeks had passed far too quickly) and ignored the missing gaps.

It was better that way. Better to get as close to happiness as they could before everything took a turn for the worse. Fall was upon them and winter was coming, and in Azkaban, that was when things became *bad.*

"She's a monster, Sirius," Severus emphasized as he angrily paced the room. "An absolute monster."

Sirius watched him, masking his amusement behind sympathy. It took a lot to work Severus up, and he enjoyed seeing the wrath of Severus Snape directed at someone other than himself.

"She has the gall, the absolute *gall*, to say that she needs to observe my class," Severus ranted, not waiting for a response. "And then she stands there in that horrid pink outfit and tries to correct me! Correct me as if I'm not the potion master! As if she's the one who spent her whole life studying potions and is the undeniable expert in the field even though she's a toad of a woman who uses a sickening saccharine to hide her shitty and nausea-inducing personality."

Severus paused, his eyes flashing. "If she thinks she knows so much about potions, it's only apt for me to test her." He tilted his head. "Don't you agree, my dear?"

The look chilled Sirius, and he felt momentarily sorry for Umbridge. "Please don't poison her."

Severus curled his lips up in a smile. "Any person knowledgeable of potions would know how to counteract the effects."

Sirius paused, thinking. He tried to recall Slughorn's lectures but couldn't remember anything past the times he sabotaged Snape's potion. Oh, and that one time James's blew up in his

face and made him smell like dead fish for a week. “Really? How do you?”

Severus peered down at him and sighed in exasperation. “A bezoar stone. Obviously.”

“Obviously,” Sirius muttered. “So slip her a little something, and she grabs one of these bezoar stone things and she’s good to go.”

Severus rolled his eyes. “Yes, but she won’t because she’s an idiot. Wouldn’t even know the difference between fluxweed and asphodel.”

“I wouldn’t either,” Sirius commented.

Severus stared at him in annoyance. “Your point?”

Sirius opened his mouth to respond but stopped. No need to redirect Severus’s anger towards him. “Sorry, got it, she’s an idiot. I’m sure you can scare her away.”

Severus pressed his lips into a thin line. “She seems to…” he began, breaking off.

“Seems to what?” he asked, leaning forward. Possibilities ran through his mind, but he needed to hear Severus say it.

“Taken a fancy to me,” he said in disgust.

Sirius couldn’t help it. He burst out laughing.

“Something funny?”

Sirius shook his head, restraining his laughter. “Nope, no, of course not.”

“It’s not funny,” he exclaimed angrily. “She thinks I would actually be interested. As if I could ever find a toad like her attractive.”

“And, well, you’ve got me,” Sirius offered, his lips twitching upwards. The idea of Umbridge staring at Severus with moon eyes should have made him jealous, but actually made him want to bust his gut laughing.

“I don’t see how that’s relevant,” Severus said dryly, and Sirius winked.

“So does she write you love letters? Send you flowers? If I’ve got competition now, I need to know her moves.”

Severus scowled. “Latches herself onto me like a leech. Minerva finds it hysterical.”

“Have you, you know, hinted that you’re maybe not interested?”

Severus stared at him like he had just qualified for a competition in stupidity.

“No, Sirius,” he said, his voice dripping with sarcasm, “I’ve made sure to convey that I want her to carry my children.”

Sirius raised his hands defensively and pretended to think for a moment. “Looks like you’re in a tough spot,” he said, his lips twitching into a smile.

“I certainly don’t keep you around for your insight, do I?” Severus remarked scathingly. He paused, pinching the bridge of his nose. Sirius had noticed the habit a few weeks ago and found it

adorable. Not that he would tell Severus, of course. “I don’t want her to-to bother me. I want to be left alone and not assaulted by a pink pimple. There’s so much else-,” he growled, his eyes growing distant, “So much else to worry about.”

Sirius stood and walked over to Severus. He pulled him into a loose hug and pressed his lips against his ear. “It will pass,” he comforted. “You can look very mean and scary even though you’re not, and if Umbridge has any sense, she’ll forget it. Develop an attraction for Filch instead.”

Severus rested his chin on Sirius’s shoulder and sighed. “I hope so. I don’t want to go through a year with her…”

“If she continues to bother you,” Sirius rubbed circles into the small of Severus’s back, “I’ll go visit her. I can be even scarier than you if you’d believe it.”

Severus huffed out a laugh and relaxed. “I’d like to see that,” he murmured into the nook of his neck. Sirius pressed a kiss on the side of his head, then a kiss on his mouth and then they were tumbling backward into bed.

Ice. Chains. Water. Can’t breathe. Can’t breathe. Pain. So much pain. And cold. Cold. Cold. COLD.

Count. Screams? **Screams.** Laughter. Him? No. No. *Count.* **Panic. Panic now. NOW. They are coming, they are coming, they are coming.** Who? **THEM**. *One.* WHY WHY james no no no severus no not him. not him. *Two.* go back? **Go Back. Quiet.** Screams? **Quiet. No one. Nothing.** Dementors? **Nothing.** *Three Four Five.* Can’t breathe can’t breathe can’t breathe don’t send me back don’t send me back *Six seven eight nine ten breathe.*

Breathe. Breathe. Breathe. Breathe. Breathe

Look. Chair that Severus sits in. Ceiling. Soft carpet. Nothing in Azkaban is soft. You’re *safe.*

Until you go back.

I’m not going back. I’ll die first. I’ll kill myself.

You might want to, you know. One day.

I *won’t.*

You might when you lose Severus like you lost James.

I *won’t.*

You will when you want to be numb.

No, I –

They will make you go numb, if you let them. You know that.

No no no no no shut up shut up shut up I don’t want to remember that why is it so cold why am I so cold

It could be you. It was almost you.

It *wasn't* me. Harry-he stopped it.

You remember how it felt.

I-

Tell me.

quiet. cold. painless.

What happens when you lose Severus?

…pain.

Do you want that?

I don't want to think about it. Please leave me alone.

I am you. I can't leave. Do you want that?

No, of course not.

So what will you do?

…nothing.

Will you kill yourself?

maybe.

Will you go numb?

maybe.

Yes. You will.

Go away. Please go away.

Okay.

"How was your day?" Severus asked, kissing him gently.

"Same old," Sirius shrugged, immense relief crashing over him. Seeing Severus, feeling Severus broke through all the icy jags stuck in his skin. Severus kissed him again and sunk into his chair, pulling out sheets of paper.

"How is, what are you reading now?"

"*Slaughterhouse Five.* It's good," Sirius replied, sitting across from him. Severus smiled at him and took off his shoes to wrap his foot around Sirius's calf. "Why such a good mood?"

"It's good to see you," Severus responded, and all the coldness lingering in Sirius's soul was blasted away.

"Is it now?" he teased, and Severus rolled his eyes. Sirius smiled, learning forward to draw

Severus into a longer kiss.

“Got work to do,” Severus mumbled, shrugging him off after a moment.

“What work?” Sirius leaned back and grabbed his book to thumb the pages. The movement comforted him. He felt shaky and anxious after this afternoon and needed to ground himself.

“Potions,” he answered, looking down at the paper. Sirius hummed, indicating he wanted elaboration. “Some grading,” he continued. “Making sure the Weasley twins don’t blow themselves up?”

“What do you mean?”

“They’ve moved past simple charms and are attempting to use potions to expand their brand of products. I caught them sneaking around in the potions pantry a few weeks ago.”

“So you’re...”

“I gave them detention, of course. But I knew it wouldn’t deter them, so I told them that if they wanted to use the school's equipment, they must approve their potions with me to avoid damage to school property.”

“But basically to keep themselves from blowing up.”

“Or feeding a student a potion that permanently turns their face into a goldfish or something else equally nonsensical and damaging.”

“Does Molly know?” Sirius asked, tilting his head. His impression was that Molly clearly disapproved of Fred and George’s creations.

“No,” Severus said, looking up to meet his gaze. “It would probably be for the best that she didn’t know.”

Sirius huffed out a laugh and imagined an enraged Molly chasing Severus down. “Your secret’s safe with me. Are their potions any good?”

Severus arched an eyebrow and thought. “Their creativity knows no limits but they lack the mathematical fortitude to calculate exact measurements. In this one, they were planning to add two hundred milligrams of boomslang skin with four leaves of peppermint. Two leaves of peppermint will drive the reaction with the boomslang and create the acidity needed to react with the basic elements of the potion. Four drives the reaction too far and leaves them with a melted cauldron and second-degree burns.”

“I’m glad you’re helping them.”

Severus shrugged. “It saves me from a future headache.”

“Still kind of you,” Sirius pressed, smiling softly. Severus scowled, uncomfortable by the compliment. He always shied away from any acknowledgment of his positive qualities, especially his compassion, even though Sirius viewed it as one of his most attractive qualities. On the surface, Severus came off as mean and uncaring. He rarely had a kind word, but his actions spoke volumes. It was a remarkable feature of his – to do so much for others yet never ask for thanks or acknowledgment. Of course, that made Sirius want to layer him with both thanks and acknowledgment, and he did so freely. Severus always scowled and shrugged them off, but Sirius knew they mattered.

“Did you spend all day reading?” Severus asked, changing the subject. He sunk back into his chair and stretched.

Sirius shrugged. “More or less. Worked out a bit too.” Definitely did not have one of his paralyzing panic attacks.

Severus nodded, apparently content with the answer. He focused on the papers at hand, and Sirius watched him for a moment longer before sinking back into his book.

Manos

Chapter Notes

Everyone stay healthy! and please practice social distancing!

I'm probably going to go crazy in my house but it's not worth interacting with others besides close family! Especially if you feel immune because you're young and healthy - there's plenty of videos showing the error in that thinking.

Instead, just stay inside and reread Sleepless :) And please feel free to message me over anything :)

"It's your hands," Sirius said softly, intertwining his fingers with Severus's. Severus shifted, raising his head from Sirius's chest and looking up at him.

"Huh?" Severus asked, his eyes a little distant. Sirius had started to notice it more; it happened sometimes after sex. He didn't go away completely, not like on those bad nights when he returned from Voldemort. Rather, it was like he had lessened his grip on reality and sunk into himself. Sirius figured Severus's head was full of places he had created to escape too.

"Your hands," Sirius repeated, holding one up to regard it. Severus looked up at it, his eyes sharpening.

"What about them?" he asked, his voice carrying a hint of wariness. He tried to pull his away, but Sirius brought it to his mouth to kiss.

"They're my favorite part of you."

Severus was silent for a moment and then scoffed. "Don't be ridiculous, Black."

"I'm not. I'm completely Sirius."

Severus groaned and swatted at him. "Spare me." Sirius chuckled and pressed another kiss to his hand.

"I am serious, though."

Severus was silent again. He pulled a leg up slightly, skin brushing skin, and Sirius resisted the urge to flip over and kiss Severus hard.

"Okay," Severus finally agreed, and Sirius furrowed his eyebrows. He hadn't anticipated this muted of a reaction; Severus used dry humor to disarm the compliments, not this muted lack of interest.

"Is something wrong?" Sirius asked, his mind hurtling over the past week and picking apart interactions, cringing at his general idiocy. It sickened something near his heart and squeezed his eyes shut to dispel the irrational panic.

Severus exhaled against his chest. "Don't see why it would be my hands," he admitted

quietly, his face hidden. Sirius's grip tightened as he thought the sentence over.

"Why not? They're beautiful."

Severus did his best to shrug, his shoulder bumping Sirius's side.

"Why don't you think so?" Sirius asked quickly. He tried to think of what could be causing this reaction; James and he bullied Severus over his nose and hair, never his hands.

"They' re—," Severus began to say, before reconsidering, "I just think there would be other parts you liked better."

"I mean I like all of you, Sev."

"Okay," Severus said, yawning and rolling onto his side so he faced away from Sirius. Sirius knew the yawn was fake; this was how Severus tried to end conversations he didn't want to have.

Sirius rolled his side also and put an arm around Severus, spooning him. He buried his face into the back of the man's head and breathed in deeply.

"Why don't you like your hands?" he asked quietly, posing the question as innocently as he could. Severus tensed against him but didn't pull away.

"They're fine," Severus said blankly. Sirius didn't respond as he waited for Severus to sort through his thoughts. "What more do you want, Sirius?" he growled.

"Why should I not think they're beautiful?" he continued, pressing a kiss behind Severus's ear.

"I…because they're not. Okay? And don't ask me another fucking question," Severus hissed, and Sirius stilled. His curiosity was piqued, which meant he wasn't going to be able to let this go. But clearly this was a topic that Severus did not want to dwell on, and he was not going to be happy if Sirius continued to push like this.

"Severus…" Sirius began, trying to figure out a way to get his answer. "I'm not sure I understand." Severus huffed and rubbed at his arms.

"Shouldn't you be used to that, you stupid fucking mutt?" he hissed, his voice scathing. There was venom behind it, and it cut through Sirius. They still joked and teased each other, but after they started sleeping together, there was no cruelty behind it. Not like this.

Sirius swallowed hard. He didn't think he was stupid, despite the best efforts of his mother, but he wasn't nearly as smart at Severus. To be honest, he wasn't all that remarkable, to begin with.

Stupid.

No, nope, this wasn't happening to him right now. He started slamming doors shut in his mind, but the word had already rooted in his thoughts and he couldn't kill it. It echoed through him, and it felt like his ribs were cracking.

He squeezed his eyes shut. He wasn't stupid, was he? Severus was one of the smartest people he knew, and if he thought so then surely he was right.

Stupid. Dull. Dimwitted.

Go away. Go away. Go away.

Why do you waste Severus's time?

I don't. He likes me, he's said so.

Has he?

Sirius cast his thoughts back, and a sticky blackness grew in his chest. It was implied, wasn't it? If Severus hadn't said it, it didn't mean it was untrue.

Yes. It does.

"Sirius?" the voice cut through, and Sirius opened his eyes quickly, blinking at the light. Severus had pulled away and was now looking at him concerned. "I didn't mean that. I'm sorry." His voice was raw, and his eyes were troubled. "I just…if you only…I'm sorry."

Sirius coughed and used it as an excuse to look away and shift farther from Severus. "It's fine, I wasn't—," he trailed off, words failing him. The insecurity was still biting him and he really just wanted to lie in silence now.

Severus looked lost. "Sirius, I really… I only said it because I'm frustrated at myself. You're not…I think you're brilliant Sirius."

Sirius stretched his hands above his head and sighed. A part of him wanted to listen and believe him. Another part was caught up on how Severus had never told him he liked him.

"I said it was fine, Severus," Sirius said, his voice coming out harsher than he had wanted. Severus closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. Sirius caught a glimmer of fear in the way his mouth twitched and some panic in the way his eyelids flickered.

"No, it's not," Severus pleaded, and beneath the cold apathy that had descended upon him, Sirius still understood how he felt. Severus was terrified of pushing him away, of saying something that would end this. And in his mind, this was one such thing. "Sirius, you' re—."

"What? What am I?" Anger flared through the apathy, and he could feel that black voice chuckling in the back of his head, which only made him angrier.

"Brilliant, and wonderful, and kind. Someone who is, um…" Severus trailed off and Sirius slid his eyes shut. He no longer wanted to look at Severus. He had thought Severus could return the depths of his feelings, but clearly, he had been wrong. He had fallen in love, and Severus probably only thought of him as someone he could fuck to help him destress. That black voice seemed to wholeheartedly agree.

"Save it, Sev. You don't need to pretend." Sirius turned away, dreading the rest of the night.

"Pretend what?" Severus asked weakly. He sounded strangled as if someone was forcing the words back into him.

Sirius huffed out a laugh. "I don't know, that you care about me?"

"I-," Severus stopped short.

Sirius let out another bitter laugh as something curled up and died inside of him.

“I do-,” Severus continued, his breathing becoming shorter.

“Really?” Sirius said cruelly, “How come you’ve never said it?” God, he wanted this man to hurt, if only to feel like how he did.

“Because I’m…I’m…not good with it, and-and…” His voice was trembling, the hint of a stutter emerging. “And,” Severus continued, taking a moment to steady himself. He sounded pained and vulnerable, and it hurt Sirius. But not enough to end it for him. “And everyone I say that too…they…”

Sirius chuckled harshly. “It’s not like I can fucking leave you if that’s what you’re worried about.”

Severus was silent for a very long time, and Sirius focused only on that blanket of black anger covering him.

“Would you want to? If you could?” His voice was fragile, nearing a dangerous breaking point.

“I don’t know,” he said, realizing in the split second afterward those were probably some of the cruelest words he could say to Severus. He sat up, turning back to Severus to better explain himself, and was gutted.

Severus had squeezed his eyes shut, his face warped in anguish. He had curled up in on himself, his nails tearing into his arm. Sirius instinctually reached out and grabbed his wrists, pulling them away from his arms and the damage they were doing.

“Hey, I didn’t mean it like that. It’s just—I really care about you, Severus. Okay? And if you aren’t feeling anything like that, then this isn’t something I can put myself through again.”

Severus shook his head, his shoulders shaking violently. “I don’t want you to leave…” he whispered, before pressing his lips tightly together. Sirius sighed, the anger shifting into exasperation.

“I don’t want you too either. But I have to have some certainty here.”

Severus shook his head, his hands tightening their hold on Sirius. “Please…”

“Jesus, Sev, what is it?”

“Don’t make me say it,” Severus whispered, the fear in his voice taking Sirius aback.

“What?” Sirius said forcefully, and Severus flinched.

“Everyone I think I …they all die b-because of me. I can’t-not with you.”

“Severus…There’s no way that’s true.” His exasperation had morphed into concern, abject horror, and that desperate sense of love he had for this man.

“Yes,” Severus choked out. He tilted forward, his head falling down. Sirius let go of one of his hands to run it Severus’s hair and cradle his head and pull it to his shoulder. “Mum.”

“That’s wasn’t you, Severus.”

"She tried to leave with me. So that I wouldn't be hurt anymore. B-but he found us and s-shot her up so she couldn't leave again. So she was dependent on him. Because of me."

"Severus…"

"Lily, of course."

Sirius shook his head. "No, that was me. I wanted to make Pettigrew the secret keeper. Those deaths were on me, Sev."

"I-I told him…the prophecy…the prophecy that led him to…to Lily."

Sirius was stunned silent.

"I'm sorry," Severus choked out, bending over completely and leaning heavily onto Sirius.

"Severus, we were both responsible, okay? Not just you," he protested, but Severus shook his head.

"Reggie," Severus whispered brokenly.

"What about him?" Sirius asked dumbly. He felt like he was in a tunnel, and he couldn't really see much except the top of Severus's head.

"I…I led him to the Dark Lord," Severus admitted, his breathing sharp intakes.

Sirius shook his head, relieved it wasn't anything worse. "No, he wanted to join. Liked the whole pureblood deal." He thought for a moment, a realization cutting through him. "You loved him?" he asked, stunned. He suddenly felt weak.

Severus fell silent, his body trembling. "W-we were friends. B-but he was important."

Sirius thought for a moment and decided to move past it. He couldn't think of that right now. He refocused on the conversation.

"You weren't responsible for that one, Sev. And Lily was on me too, and your father was a piece of shit."

Severus didn't reply.

"So it's not true then. Nothing's going to happen to me if you tell me you like me, okay? I promise."

"What-what if you're wrong?"

"I won't be," Sirius said, his voice low. He gently stroked Severus's head, the earlier anger long gone. "I really like you, Sev."

Severus was quiet for a long moment. He glanced up at Sirius, his eyes red and vulnerable. "I-," he choked out, and Sirius was lost in those eyes, those dark eyes and the beautiful soul hiding behind them. "I l-love you." He nodded as if telling himself, and then averted his gaze, his muscles freezing.

Sirius blinked rapidly, emotions welling up inside him and flooring him. "I…oh god, Sev… I love you too." He pulled Severus against him and lay down again, tangling his hair in the man's hair. The words hung heavy in the room, the implication more than either one could bear to admit.

They lay silently together: Sirius gently running his hand through Severus's hair while Severus gripped onto his side and buried his face into the crook of Sirius's neck. Those three words captured everything they wanted to express and to try for more would be fruitless. Instead, Sirius basked in those words, that admittance of love.

The glow radiated through him, causing the black voice to retreat in fear and the layer of frost on his lungs and heart to melt away. The words repeated in his head until all past horrors were forgotten and he finally felt that burst of sheer happiness he had lost with James and had sorely missed ever since.

Severus Snape loved him and he loved Severus Snape, and finally, maybe, everything would be all right in the world.

Touch

Chapter Notes

A short one, but a nice break from some of the heaviness of the story - also heads-up for smut

As a side note, I've added another story to AO3 called Love Stuck. It's a college AU featuring Sirius Black + Severus Snape, so please feel free to check it out if interested.

“Good morning, my love,” Sirius whispered, and Severus glared sleepily at him.

“What is it?” he growled weakly, unhappy to be awoken.

“You’ve got class,” Sirius explained, and Severus pulled himself awake, groaning.

“Stupid kids,” he muttered, and Sirius huffed out a sound of amusement. He pulled away from Sirius’s embrace and sat up, taking a moment to collect himself. Sirius gazed up at him, a half-way smile on his face. “What?”

“I love you, you greasy Slytherin,” Sirius said, his eyes bright and alive. Severus paused, the words overwhelming him for a minute. Last night had been a shit show, but the outcome could have been far worse.

He tried to return the sentiment but the words hooked onto his tongue and died in his throat. The looming terror of losing Sirius sickened him. It was irrational, and he despised that, but with three deaths of his loved ones on his hands, well, he really hoped he could beat the odds this time.

The words certainly felt nice, however, and Sirius was so earnest and caring that it floored Severus. With these three words in his arsenal now, Severus knew he was a lost cause. He only hoped he could find a way to express the sentiment back to him and overcome his irrational cowardice.

He decided to throw a pillow at Sirius to hide his reaction.

“Go back to sleep, mutt,” Severus said fondly, leaning over to press a kiss on Sirius’s forehead. Sirius beamed up at him, and before Severus could pull away, he grabbed the back of his head and kissed him deeply.

Severus started to stand up, but Sirius grabbed his hand.

“Please don’t hate me,” he started, and Severus felt his chest closing up. Sirius was going to get another confession out of him; this stupid mutt wouldn’t drop anything. “Your hands…why don’t you like them?” he said slowly, his gaze pleading and apologetic.

Severus sighed, sorting through his thoughts. After his behavior last night, he owed an explanation to Sirius. It was only fair.

“They’ve done terrible, evil things, Sirius. That’s what I see when I look at them,” he admitted, focusing his gaze on the door.

Sirius brought one of his hands to his mouth and kissed it. “That doesn’t mean they aren’t beautiful.”

Severus sighed and looked back towards Sirius. “Of course you would say that.”

“Come here, my love,” Sirius said quietly, pressing a string of kisses on each finger.

“I’ve got class,” Severus protested weakly, but he was already leaning towards Sirius’s warmth, soaking in his kindness.

“They’re stupid kids. They can wait,” Sirius answered, grabbing the back of Severus’s head to kiss him deeply. Severus responded in kind, supporting himself with a hand on the mattress. The fevered kiss continued for a moment until Sirius’s stubble scratched Severus’s cheek. He moved his mouth along Severus’s neck, sucking gently. He tilted his head aside as his breath hitched.

“C’mere,” Sirius mumbled, his hands reaching underneath Severus’s shirt. He lightly scraped his nails across Severus’s back. Severus grabbed the hem of his shirt with his free hand and yanked upwards. He sat back to pull it off, before shifting back towards Sirius. Their mouths met again, and Severus sucked on Sirius’s lip. He tangled a hand in Sirius’s hand and tightened his grip, pulling at the strands. Sirius whimpered.

Severus pulled away after a moment and regarded the man. He was already hard, and Severus reached out a hand to cup the bulge. Sirius’s hips twitched upwards, and his eyes fluttered shut.

Severus regarded him for a moment, deciding on how he wanted this to proceed. They were lovers now, so this felt like it had to be special. More importantly, Severus needed to convey just how much Sirius meant to him. Maybe he couldn’t say those words, but he could sure as hell show it.

He pulled down Sirius’s boxers; the man slept without a shirt now, so he was already mostly naked. He also slept with socks, which Severus regarded as unconscionable and arguably evil. He generally just ignored them, and luckily he wouldn’t have to deal with them this time.

Sirius stared up at Severus, his eyes dark and heated. “What you thinking?” he murmured, his voice sounding like gravel.

“This,” he responded, casting a quick spell to rid himself of his boxers. He summoned some lube and coated his fingers.

Sirius’s breathing became quick, and his eyes darted to the corner of the room. “Okay, okay, I’ll try…”

Severus shushed him. Despite Sirius’s forays with men in his teens, he had never bottomed. He had admitted it shamefully one night as if Severus was going to be disappointed and annoyed. He offered to try, but there was fear in his voice, a fear that surpassed trepidation. Severus was not one to make anyone try something in bed that frightened them; it had happened enough to him, and he would never wish it on anyone.

Anyway, he had almost always bottomed, and while he couldn’t dismiss the appeal of switching positions, he wasn’t going to force it. He had dismissed Sirius’s concerns, reassuring him that it was not a cause of worry. He never needed to top the man, if Sirius didn’t want it.

Severus reached his hands behind him and slipped a finger inside of himself. He hated the preparation, but it hurt like hell if he didn’t do it. He quickly went through the motions and rubbed

a lubed hand on Sirius's cock.

Sirius moaned, and Severus smiled, leaning down to press a kiss against the bridge of his nose. He lifted his leg and swung it over Sirius so he was straddling the man. Sirius stared up at him with wide eyes.

"Last time you did this, I-," Sirius began breathlessly.

"I know," Severus smirked before positioning himself and sitting back. He pushed himself down, and Sirius threw his hands above his head, grabbing at the headboard.

"*Fuck,*" he moaned, peering up through hooded eyelids. "Ever told you I love you?"

Severus began to roll his hips, lightly resting a hand on Sirius's heaving chest. "Might have- *ah* - mentioned it," he said, his voice hitching. He steadied himself, becoming comfortable with the pace before gradually increasing it. He found the spot inside of him and his head fell forward as he moaned.

Sirius gripped Severus's thighs, nails digging into skin. His mouth fell open, and his face contorted in pleasure. "God…Sev…"

Severus leaned forward, adjusting his position. His eyes fell shut as pleasure built inside of him, and he started to lose some sense of himself. If he timed this…

"F-faster," Sirius heaved out, his head thrown backward, creating a curve in his neck. "L-love y-you."

And then they were over the precipice. Severus prided himself that he had gotten them to cum together before bliss wiped out his thoughts. A few moments of that wonderful forgetfulness, and then he was back.

Severus kissed the amazed look on Sirius's face, before pulling himself off. He stood up and grabbed his wand to quickly clean themselves off. He had no time for a shower; hopefully, the sweat would blend in with his normally greasy look.

He pulled on his robes and felt arms wrap around him.

"Love you, you greasy snake."

The words burned in his throat.

"Stupid mutt," he finally responded fondly, and Sirius huffed in amusement.

"See you tonight," Sirius said, falling back into bed.

"Of course," Severus responded with as much affirmation as he could before apparating away.

He showed up to class a little winded, but it was all in good measure.

Grave

"Happy Halloween," Sirius said unenthusiastically. Severus regarded him from the opposing chair, his expression closed. "Did you dress up?" Sirius continued, staring into the corner. His voice was flat, and he felt frighteningly empty.

"No," Severus responded shortly. "Was Remus here today?"

Sirius shrugged. "Some. We had a drink. In memory."

Severus nodded and closed his eyes. "Fourteen years," he whispered. Sirius nodded, his throat tightening.

The room fell silent, but the silence was itchy and made Sirius feel sick. He needed to speak, admit something -- it didn't matter.

"I never knew when I was in Azkaban. No calendar. So I always had to guess. Felt like… like I was dishonoring them, you know?"

"You couldn't have known," Severus responded quietly, his eyes still shut.

"Didn't really matter," Sirius ignored. He ran his hands across his legs. He felt like there were ants scurrying underneath his skin, and only Severus's presence prevented the full-scale panic attack. He was grateful; the one yesterday had been brutal and he couldn't get that black voice to shut up.

"Have-," Severus started, cutting himself off.

"What?"

"Have you been to their graves?" Severus met his gaze, his eyes tired.

"When I was on the run. But it was as Padfoot, so it wasn't really…he doesn't feel emotions as we do," Sirius said quietly, trying to suppress the memory. Padfoot was him, and he was Padfoot, but differences existed. For example, Padfoot found much more interest in chasing a squirrel then mourning his best friend.

Severus's face remained blank, his eyes betraying his exhaustion. Neither of them had slept last night.

"Let's go," Severus said quietly, standing up.

"I—I can't," Sirius protested out of habit. "And I don't want to go there again as…"

Severus shook his head. "No, you."

A feeling of self-hatred washed over Sirius. Had he been so indoctrinated that he wouldn't even leave his godforsaken prison to visit his best friend's grave? Had Azkaban fucked him up that badly?

"Okay," he said more boldly than he felt. Circuits in his head screamed at him to remain where he was supposed to, and it gave him a headache. But this was James. And he didn't know if he would have the chance again.

Severus walked to his closet and pulled out a black hoodie and scarf, throwing it at Sirius. He also summoned a baseball cap and handed it to Sirius. “There’s no one there at this time usually, but just in case.”

Sirius threw them on and glanced at the door. He hadn’t left this house in human form for months. He desperately craved the feeling of fresh air on his skin.

“Okay,” he repeated, trying to steady himself.

“Sirius, you don’t…”

“No, let’s go,” Sirius protested. Before he could question himself, Severus grabbed his wrist and apparated away.

They landed in a cemetery. Leaves littered the ground, and the air held a hint of chill. Sirius sucked in a breath, his senses momentarily overwhelmed. He stumbled forward, and Severus caught him.

A scattering of stars punctured the sky, and Severus waited as Sirius stared up in awe.

“I haven’t…not for a while,” he tried to explain, and Severus nodded.

“I know. They’re beautiful.” Severus slipped his arm between Sirius’s and his chest and pulled himself close. “Orion,” he pointed out. “Andromeda. Big Dipper. Sirius.”

“Brightest star in the night sky,” Sirius repeated; it was his favorite fact as a child.

“Burning.”

“Huh?”

“That’s what it means. Your name,” Severus explained, leaning his head against Sirius’s shoulder. Burning. Huh. He liked that.

“And yours?”

“Stern,’ Severus replied, and Sirius pressed a kiss against his head. “It’s not as good.”

“I like it,” Sirius said. He glanced around the graveyard and tried to remember when he was here last. Padfoot’s memories always blurred, however, and relied mostly on scents, so he couldn’t place anything.

“Over here,” Severus said, his voice as nebulous as the ribbon of moon in the sky. He led them to a small plot of land.

Sirius felt his breath leave him as he read the inscription. He tightened his grip on Severus as a slab of cold smashed over him. He lost the feeling of Severus’s warmth and felt plunged back into the misery of his prison cell. He had thought about them enough there; now he stood in front of the evidence of his sins and faults.

“The last enemy to be defeated is death,” he choked out, surprised he could still speak. The words settled heavily on him, but not as badly as the two definitive numbers. He had been so young – only twenty-one. When Sirius had last seen him, he had been vibrant. Worried, but bright and happy and with so much life left to live. Then Sirius had destroyed it all with his stupid naivety and blind arrogance.

"Yes," Severus agreed, his voice a faint afterthought.

They reflected silently until a thought struck Sirius. "We, um, we both, you know with each of them. Their friends. We were their best friends." He shied away from that terrifying topic and found familiar territory. "So I'm glad we're here together. Think they would have liked it."

Severus scoffed, and Sirius distantly wondered if he should consider it disrespectful. "Lily, maybe, but Potter would have lost his mind if he thought we were even considering extending basic human decency to each other."

Sirius huffed out in amusement as he imagined James's reaction. "It would have taken him some time but he would have come around."

"Lily would have made him," Severus clarified, and Sirius laughed softly.

"James was a goner with her. She got everything she wanted," he reminisced, thinking fondly on he used to mock James for her hold on him. James had thrown up his hands in exasperation but was too love-struck to care.

"I can imagine," Severus replied. "I think Potter would think I was poisoning you."

"Are you?" Sirius teased, and Severus huffed in annoyance.

"I can think of better ways to spend my time," he said dryly, and Sirius smiled.

"I think James would have liked you. Once he realized you weren't poisoning me," Sirius speculated.

Severus shook his head. "No-"

"He liked to help people, Sev. Me, Remus, even Pettigrew. I think with you he would have done the same, if not for everything else. I know he was an ass to you, but he was a good person. A good heart. He really cared, you know? And he was so bright and funny and kind-," Sirius broke off as his throat clenched and tear pricked his eyes. Shame flooded him; who was he to talk about James like that?

"I know, Sirius. I know."

A sob broke through, and he covered his mouth with his hand to smother it. His shoulders shook with the strain of it. Grief overwhelmed him, and he collapsed to the ground. Severus followed, supporting him.

Sirius dug his hand into the frozen earth and struggled to suppress the sobs. However, the grief destroyed any effort, and he eventually had to stop fighting.

He lost track of time, only felt himself getting colder. It reminded him of Azkaban in the horrible way everything did, and he suddenly wished he was back in the warmth of his bed. But no, he had to mourn James. Properly this time – not in the dementor-induced haze of Azkaban. He was at his *grave*, the place he had helped put him in, and it broke down everything inside.

Severus was silent throughout it all, only providing a steady body Sirius could lean onto, and he was so immensely grateful for him that it even floored him through the grief. He desperately hoped he would never have to lose Severus: one was more than enough.

Shouts and laughter of children echoed from the distance, but the graveyard remained

deserted other than the two grieving men.

Eventually, the sobs gave way and the grief retracted its claws just enough so that he felt he could breathe again. His fingers had gone numb, and the wetness of his tears chilled his face.

“Fuck, I’m sorry,” he apologized as shame began to accompany the grief.

“You have nothing to be sorry for,” Severus explained, and that steady reassurance comforted him.

“Thank you, then.”

Severus sighed, looking up into the sky. “We’ll meet them again. You’ll see him again.”

Sirius rubbed his nose, grimacing at the snot. “You think?” he asked softly.

“Yes. I do. Once we defeat death.” His voice was firm, and Sirius allowed a fluttering of hope to bat against his chest. “See if Potter and I get along.”

“He doesn’t have much of a choice. And neither do you for that matter.”

Severus huffed out a sound of amusement, and Sirius wished to melt into the man. He also felt exhausted, emotionally and mentally drained. Nothing would be nicer than his bed with Severus in his arms. Except maybe seeing James alive again, but he would take what he could get.

He looked up at the stars one final time, pinpointing his namesake. He cast a final thought out to James, hoping that it would reach him in whatever afterlife existed. He couldn’t go to him now, but one day, they would meet again.

“Come, let’s go home,” Sirius said, pulling Severus up. Severus summoned a bouquet of lilies and placed them on the ground. They stared for a final moment at the headstone, before Severus apparated them away. The graveyard fell silent once again.

Panic

Chapter Notes

This marks the end of part 1 of the story.

There are currently three parts -the second will occur over December and Christmas. The third will conclude this story.

I want to thank everyone who has made it this far, and I hope you all enjoy this next segment!

"You may go," the Dark Lord said softly, his red eyes hidden in shadows. Severus curtly nodded and stepped away, the tension not leaving until he had left the room. He followed the familiar path to the gardens of the estate where he could apparate away.

The Dark Lord had been in a reserved mood tonight, and while his quiet moods swung from malicious to cold in the space of a heartbeat, he had remained primarily the latter. Severus had been alone, always a cause of concern, but the Dark Lord was content with sharing a bottle of wine and inquiring about his opinion on the war. They had done this in the first war when he was desperate to prove his worth and brilliance to his master and the Dark Lord listened closely to his ideas, but this was the first time since he had returned.

It only lasted an hour and had been pleasant. He did not have to stumble away in pain. He did not have to shake away the horrors of the night. Instead, the wine made him feel slightly floaty and their conversation had been stimulating. He possessed a keen sense of strategy, and for all his faults, the Dark Lord was a brilliant man.

He had anticipated a long night at Malfoy's Manor, so a small smile slipped on his face. He could spend tonight with tonight, and for the first time, he would return from these calls in a good mood. They would have sex again tonight; he had no fresh horror to keep him from it.

Reaching the gardens, he grasped the silver necklace and his gut twisted. He landed with a thump and instantly froze.

Sirius Black lay on the floor, his face wrenched in anguish. He sucked in breaths, gulping as if he couldn't get enough air. His hands clenched the carpet, and he whimpered a pitiable, painful sound.

Severus dropped to his knees and lay a hand on the man's shoulder. He noticed a slight tremor and gripped tighter to draw Sirius's attention. Sirius blinked blindly over at him, his eyes wide and unseeing. He squeezed his eyes shut and turned away.

"Sirius, hey," Severus began. He scooted around so he rested against the chair and pulled Sirius into his lap so his back pressed into his stomach, legs outstretched. He rested his chin on Sirius's shoulders and firmly grasped his forearms. Sirius appeared not to notice. "Sirius, I have you now. I've got you." Sirius let out short panicked breaths. "I want you to focus on my breathing, okay? Focus on my breathing. Just follow it, okay? Follow my breathing." He drew in slow, deep breaths and whispered words of comfort.

Sirius stared unseeing at the bed, his breathing unchanged. He trembled violently as if he had walked outside in a snowstorm with nothing on. Severus wrapped his arms around him and pressed a gentle kiss on his jawline. Sirius shuddered.

"Breathe with me, my love," Severus whispered, panic starting to latch inside of him. His memories threatened to surge, and he pushed them down violently. He had to pull Sirius through this; he couldn't lose himself.

"Severus?" Sirius mumbled confused, his voice catching.

"Yes, Sirius. I've got you."

Sirius tensed, but then began to slowly relax. He clutched Severus's hands. Severus counted out his breaths, and Sirius began to follow along. The violent shivering subsided until he only lightly shook.

"Severus," he muttered weakly. Severus pressed another kiss against his jawline.

"Shh, it's okay. You're safe. You're with me," Severus continued, not considering the implications of his words. He only wanted Sirius to pull through the panic attack, no matter what he had to say or reveal.

"Severus, you're here," Sirius repeated, curling into the man. "You're here."

"Yes, I'm here."

"Thought…thought you were with him tonight," Sirius continued, exhaustion dragging at his voice.

"He let me go early."

"Oh," Sirius replied, head dipping forward. "M'okay."

Severus shushed him, but he shook his head and pulled away.

"M'Okay," he repeated forcefully, pushing away Severus's arms. He kept his face tilted away.

"Sirius," Severus said uncertain. He recognized the denial, seen it so often in himself, but addressing it was never easy. "You had a panic attack," he stated bluntly. Sirius shook his head and pulled himself up using the bed frame.

"Over now," he replied, taking slow, ginger steps towards the bathroom. Severus watched him go, his heart screaming at him to stop him.

"You're not okay. You don't have to be okay," he finally managed as Sirius was about to disappear into the other room. Sirius let out a bitter laugh and closed the door behind him.

Severus stared at the door and squeezed the bridge of his nose. He choked against his own rising panic and flinched at the sudden sound of the shower. Steadying himself, he found that point of calm that he clenched onto desperately whenever the fear and panic threatened to overwhelm. He forced himself to distance himself and take an analytical approach; Sirius was experiencing panic attacks. That was a problem. He would need to find a solution.

A solution of what sorts? Like Azkaban, Sirius grabbed onto denial to protect himself.

Severus doubted he would mention the panic attack at all, and the problem would fester until something jarred it into the light. He could confront Sirius, face his wrath and bitter apathy, and hopefully disrupt that cycle.

He could ignore it. Store it away and give Sirius an out. When it became a problem again, address it, but until then, let it be.

He had ignored his own back when they plagued him. The Death Eaters didn't care if he suddenly found the walls had started to suffocate him; it would be a weakness. Then, at Hogwarts, he rarely had unexpected visitors. He could hide them, and he hid them well.

They tore him apart. Made him feel like he was back with his *father*, back in that *bed,* in the moment when he found that Lily had…

He turned to drugs as an escape. Drugs, alcohol, and then the sex had followed. More hands pressed against him, more men just *staring* at him. He had control though. He decided to take those pills and snort those lines. He decided which person he would take to bed. He decided how he would spend those nights.

The panic attacks took that all away. They made him powerless, and it wasn't until Molly found him in the grips of one and relentlessly helped him that he could chip away that power. He had found that point of calm, that serene lake in his mind where the fear and panic turned into a work of impressionism: clearly, obviously there, but blurred, softened.

Molly hadn't ignored his, but she tried not to confront him. Asked him concerned questions, but never got angry or upset at his lack of response. Instead, she taught him how to cook. She gave him a respite, a way to focus on something other than *that* because when he felt the hands start to press into his skin, he found a complicated recipe and didn't rest until it was finished.

It didn't always work, but sometimes it did. And that was all he needed.

The shower turned off, and Sirius remerged, wearing only boxers and rubbing a towel through his hair. He grinned, but it didn't reach his eyes. "C'mon, get off the floor, Sev. I'm okay, I promise. And I want to hear why he let you go so early, something happen?"

Sirius already knew how to cook. He worked out, read, wrote. He needed something he could teach him, something that Sirius could do on his own…

"Sirius," Severus began, standing up. "Is there anyone else here tonight?"

Sirius shook his head. "Nope. Just you and me. Why? You want to screw on the kitchen table or something?"

Severus pulled a face, and Sirius laughed. If Severus hadn't seen him ten minutes ago, he would never have known. How many other times had he seen Sirius fresh off a panic attack but with no idea anything had happened? "I want to play your piano."

Sirius's brow crinkled in confusion. "The piano? No one's touched that old thing since Reggie."

"Well, then, will you mind?"

"No, I just…when did you learn?"

"I taught myself a few years back. Thought it would be a nice way to pass the time," he

explained. Minerva had suggested it to him; she was surprised that with hands like his, he had never even tried.

"Oh, yeah, okay, you can play," Sirius replied, and they walked down to the living room.

"You've been alone all day?" he asked quietly. Sirius shrugged and didn't answer.

Severus sat on the bench and pulled up the wooden panel. He had expected a flurry of dust, but the piano was spotless. He played a chord and the notes rung out perfectly. He played the opening of Nocturne in E Flat major, and a sense of calm washed over him. Playing the piano always took the edge off and let him relax.

Sirius hovered over him, watching intently. "Sit," Severus said, his hands dancing over the keys, and he complied, sitting in the armchair and keeping his gaze firmly on Severus's hands.

The song continued, and Severus lost himself in the notes. He fumbled a few notes but played through and let the music slow his racing thoughts. He hit the last note and let it linger.

"That was beautiful," Sirius said awed. He sounded slightly breathless as if he had held his breath the entire time.

Severus nodded and gestured for Sirius to join him on the bench. "Do you know how to play?" he asked as Sirius sat beside him. He shook his head.

"I know a few notes, but it was Reggie who really knew how to play. Mother wanted us to learn, so I was determined to hate it. But I think you just made me change my mind."

He smiled briefly and focused back on the piano. "Would you like to learn?"

Sirius huffed a laugh. "I mean-I don't know. What you did was beautiful, but I won't be able to do that." Severus turned to him and frowned.

"You don't know that. Anyway, you didn't see the years of hard work I put into this. Learning piano isn't a matter of playing well, it's about playing. Good, bad, anywhere in between."

"I don't know where to start," Sirius admitted. He stared somberly at the instrument.

"The chords. And then Ode to Joy or Canon in D. That's how I started."

"I…okay, I'll try. But you have to play me another song."

Severus pressed a kiss against Sirius's cheek and guided his hands to the keys. He explained the chords and watched as Sirius's fingers clumsily hit them. The sound was halting and heavy, but a start. After about thirty minutes, Severus let Sirius rest and began Claire de Lune. The effervescent sound haunted the room and broke the silence hanging over the house.

Severus didn't bring up the panic attacks again. He let it be; given his experience, Sirius needed to figure his own way out. He could provide support, but he couldn't save him. Instead, on nights when they were alone in Grimmauld, they played the piano.

Severus would play a song or two, and Sirius would watch stricken with emotion. Severus would kiss him at the end, and Sirius would sigh against him, the intimacy enough to make him turn away.

Then Sirius, returning to reality, would replace Severus and do his best to play through Ode

to Joy or Canon in D or Claire De Lune, which he had just started to learn. He would stumble through notes, muttering curses, but he progressed quickly. It took him a day or two to fully learn the song, and then a few more to master it. It was like he spent all day repeating the songs over and over which, if that was true, Severus wouldn't be surprised.

His mood had changed too. Before he had been twitchy, anxious, always bouncing a leg or glancing towards the window. Now, he was quieter. Stiller, driven, focused. The piano centered him, gave him something measurable and controlled. Severus had been the same with the cooking; there was no uncertainty or hesitation – food either tasted good or it didn't. Music sounded good or it didn't. It was up to you, *solely you*, to make it work.

Severus loved watching him play. The way he would bend over the piano, shoulders fixed and gaze intense. He would pound out the last notes of the song, pause for a moment, then look over at Severus, his expression dependent on how he played. Severus would kiss him again, and they would usually disregard the piano and retreat upstairs, hands pressed tightly and kisses sloppy and eager.

Those were wonderful nights. Treasured nights. With a sickening sense of worry, Severus wondered how much longer it would last. He knew it must end; nothing this good lasted very long, at least not for him. The Dark Lord only had to find out about their relationship for it all to shatter, and the thought instilled dread.

For now, though, they had the piano and the music and each other.

He also didn't bring up Azkaban or James Potter. The confession was too tender, and it hurt Sirius badly enough already. One day they would talk about it, but he couldn't rush Sirius toward it. He had gotten the truth out of Sirius, even if he wasn't proud of his methods, and that was enough. He had no desire to make the man dwell on that period of his life, and Sirius appeared content to pretend that conversation never happened.

Sirius did the same with Severus's childhood. While the confession was clearly not forgotten, it was let to rest. They didn't talk anymore about their childhoods or their parents, but Sirius had taken to kissing Severus's nose often. Severus appreciated it; he hated pity and would despise it if Sirius started walking on eggshells around him. There was comfort in the continuation of their routine, and neither of their pasts had hampered that relationship. It had strengthened it and added a deep intimacy that frightened Severus if he thought too much on it.

During the past few weeks, people had also become increasingly cued into their relationship. Even though they maintained the pretense of hated rivals, they still let slip gestures of familiarity. Remus had smiled slyly when he noticed and realized just how much time Severus was spending here, and Molly was enthusiastic. Minerva had nodded knowingly at him and mentioned something about how she saw this coming years ago. Dumbledore, the matchmaker he was, beamed every time Severus mentioned Sirius. Tonks sent him confused stares, the other Order members seemed unsure of what to make of him.

Then, of course, there was Sirius. They still snapped at each other in public, throwing acidic barbs back and forth. They treated it like a game, feigning the ill intent. They kept track of who won each round, and Severus was quite proud that he had managed to take a comfortable lead. It bothered Sirius to no end.

In private, they continued to explore the new relationship they found themselves in. They talked at great lengths, conversations ranging from nothing to everything. It was largely the quiet conversations found late at night that they both found enormous comfort in. Like before, they would spend time in silence. On nights when they couldn't go downstairs, Sirius would read, his

hands tapping against the armrest as he mimicked the piano keys, and Severus would work and the evening would pass in contentment.

Unlike before, a physical and romantic aspect had been added. More nights than not, they ended up entwined with each other in bed, hands and mouths tracing over skin. They made love often, and while Severus had initially worried about how that would affect him, he found that Sirius went about in a way that kept his fear and repulsion at bay.

Sirius seemed determined to make the experience as comfortable and pleasurable for Severus as possible. He never demanded, never forced. He treated Severus like he was someone beautiful and worthy of love. It was a clear line between fucking and making love, and Sirius stayed firmly on the latter.

Severus scarcely felt the familiar surges of panic. The itchiness and disgust never settled on him like it had so many times. He never dreaded the idea of going through the act. He rather enjoyed it, an unusual feeling for him.

He also loved watching Sirius in the thralls of passion. Because of his experience, however painful it was, he knew exactly what to do to bring Sirius to climax again and again. He loved the amazed look in his eyes afterward, the way Sirius would trace and kiss his face. He adored the small touches, the ones that made the sex feel more than a transaction. He would stare into Sirius's eyes and his chest would swell with a warm glow.

They did it quite a bit and much to their enjoyment. However, Severus would take the romantic fool of Sirius Black over the sex any day. Severus didn't hold much to romance; love was not familiar to him and he didn't know how to express it. He eschewed romantic gestures, believing them foolish and disparaging couples who indulged in them.

Sirius happened to be such a person and romantic to a fault. He wasn't showy or needy with it; it stemmed from his compassion. For whatever reason, he had fallen hard for Severus and once he had admitted it, seemed to have no problem expressing it further. He threw in compliments about Severus, about his intelligence and humor and courage. He often disguised them as jokes, which helped Severus eliminate any doubt that they were less than genuine. Sirius wasn't complimenting him to flatter; he was doing it because he genuinely liked the things he saw in Severus. They always made Severus falter slightly, and Sirius would smile brightly at him as he scowled.

Sirius did small gestures, shying away from the showy. He didn't buy Severus a large bouquet of flowers; he rubbed his feet and massaged his shoulders. He read aloud at night, coaxing Severus to sleep. He expressed interest when Severus rattled off about potions. He touched him in small ways often.

Severus distantly recognized this was treatment one should expect from any romantic relationship, but he had never had anyone treat him in such a way before. No one had cared enough, and if they did have interest in him, it was ill-conceived and executed with ill intent. Very few, if anyone, had actually *liked* him.

It frightened him. He had slid past like into love, and he didn't know what to do about it. There was still a war and the Dark Lord, and they couldn't be anything more than hated rivals. Certainly not lovers.

His chance to walk away had passed weeks ago, and now Severus couldn't bring himself to cut it off. Even if it would spare him pain in the future, he couldn't end it. He had fallen in love with the damned fool, and it was far too late for him to do anything about it.

He could only hope it wouldn’t end in pain.

Stitches

Chapter Notes

Some nice mild canon divergence and a lovely cast of characters in this chapter.

I've also written a lengthy one-shot about Severus Snape's life from the perspective of Molly Weasley. Unfortunately, there are some spoilers mixed in so I won't be able to upload it until I finish this one. However, it is something to look forward to when we sadly but inevitably reach the end of this story.

For whatever reason, quarantine has been great for my creativity, and I'm now stuck with another Sirius Black/Severus Snape idea that won't leave my head. Still has to be written, but rest assured, it seems like I'll be writing these characters for some time to come.

With that, please enjoy!

15th December 1995

Sirius cursed, his fingers stumbling over the keys. He was halfway through Chopin's Waltz No. 10, but his fingers were being stubborn tonight and couldn't capture the cadence the song required. He winced at another off note and cursed again. Maybe he should play one of the preludes again to get back into the rhythm.

Severus had curled up on the chair, book in one hand. He raised his gaze when he heard Sirius curse.

"Off night?" he murmured, voice low and cool. He yawned and tucked his head into the crook of the chair.

Sirius glared at the keys. "It's being annoying. You're being annoying," he directed at the piano. Severus hummed, turning the page.

"Try another. Nocturne. Don't need to do a waltz tonight."

"Fine," he grumbled, pulling out the correct sheet music. Nocturne No. 2. A good one. He repositioned his hands and let his thoughts fade out slightly. He needed the balance between thinking and trusting, a balance that calmed him tremendously.

He suspected Severus knew what he was doing when he encouraged Sirius to learn piano, and hell, it had worked. He felt himself nearing the precipice of a panic attack, he would play the piano, and most of the times, he would calm down. Panic attack averted. Pure magic.

Nocturne No. 2 was coming along much better, and Severus mimed along with one hand. He gazed sleepily at Sirius. After this song, Sirius would take him upstairs, kiss him once or twice or ten times and then fall asleep draped across each other. He had had worse nights for sure.

The song neared its end when he heard shouts. He jolted, his fingers crashing against the keys. Severus sat up, his eyes flashing towards the door. He grabbed his wand and stood, walking over to the door.

"Hello?" he called out, and the voice stopped. Severus turned back to him, his face composed and tense. He was worried; Sirius could see it in his eyes.

The shouting resumed, the voice familiar, and- oh. Oh no.

"Shit!" he exclaimed, freezing. "It's the painting. Phineas Black. The alarm system." He stood up and rushed out the door, jolted into motion. "What is it?" he asked frantically, staring up at the painting. Phineas gazed down at him.

"Arthur Weasley was attacked. In the Ministry, I believe. His family and Harry Potter will be arriving here soon."

"Is he okay?" Sirius continued, and Phineas crossed his arms.

"Now, how would I know that? They've sent another painting to sound the alarm in the Ministry, but I don't know anything else."

Sirius clenched his fists "You know what?" he began, but a hand on his shoulder stopped him.

"Call the Order," Severus stated, his voice neutral and controlled. Sirius pulled out the coin Dumbledore had provided and flipped it three times to trigger the message. The coin burned for a second.

Severus nodded, then glanced down at his arm. He rubbed it, biting his lip. Then, he straightened, becoming stiff and emotionless. His eyes were blank, his face smooth, and his lips pressed together. The transformation was instantaneous.

"Kitchen," Severus ordered coolly, and Sirius complied. He sat heavily at the head of the table, and Severus gripped the top of one of the chairs.

"I will return in thirty minutes," Severus explained, and Sirius felt panic welling in him.

"Why? Did he-."

"No. But I shouldn't be the first one here."

Sirius nodded, even though he desperately wanted the man to stay. Severus left, and he sat alone, waiting. Every moment, the panic worsened and his fingers itched for the piano. He wanted to do something, anything to help, and the helplessness corroded into him.

Minerva arrived first, her face drawn.

"Do you know if they got him?" he choked out, and Minerva sat down next to him.

"Yes, they found him. He's at St. Mungo's now." Her voice was taught.

"Thank god," Sirius exclaimed, bending forward.

"The children should be here soon."

Sirius nodded. "Good, good."

“Molly is heading to St. Mungo’s, and Remus and Tonks will arrive there shortly too. The rest of the Order is aware and on guard in case of anything else. Have you seen Severus?” She asked, and Sirius glanced over at her. He had never talked about their relationship with her, but Severus trusted her and she clearly seemed to know something had deepened between the two of them.

“I…yeah. He’s not here,” he admitted.

“Is he with Voldemort? Do you know if he heard anything about this?”

He thought for a moment and shook his head. “No, and he didn’t mention anything to me.”

Minerva nodded gravely. “I will be leaving to join Molly and get her through tonight, so please take care of the children.”

“I will,” he promised, gripping the armrests tightly. He tapped his foot, his anxiety demanding an outlet. Minerva offered a grim smile and stood to leave. He sat alone until he heard a thump and a crash.

“Ow,” Fred or George exclaimed, and a few seconds later, the children filed into the kitchen, Fred or George clutching his head.

They all looked sick to their stomach and terribly pale. Ginny stared straight ahead, her eyes misty and her teeth worrying her lip. Fred and George stood subdued. Harry looked exhausted with dark bags under his eyes. Ron stood dazed.

“Sit, sit,” Sirius ordered, and they slumped into the chairs. “It’s going to be okay. They’ve got him to St. Mungo’s. They’ll let us know as soon as something happens. In the meantime, if you need anything, absolutely anything, tell me.”

The children gave signs of understanding but remained quiet. Ginny brushed away a few tears. Sirius grabbed tissues for her from the counter, but he didn’t know what to say. He doubted there was anything he could do to ease their worry. He only wished Minerva or Remus would appear to deliver good news. The minutes stretched out, and nothing changed.

Bill arrived a few minutes later, his face grim. He sat next to Ginny and pulled her into a loose hug.

Thirty minutes passed, and a knock at the door disturbed them. They all looked hopefully at the door as if their father was going to waltz in, but when only Severus walked in, their faces immediately fell.

“What is he doing here?” Ron muttered. Fred or George shushed him, and Sirius was glad. He needed Severus here tonight.

Severus scanned the room and frowned. “No news?” he asked, and Sirius shook his head.

“No,” Bill said weakly. “Nothing yet.” Ginny let out a muffled sob.

“Well, St. Mungo’s is an excellent establishment with excellent doctors. If he hadn’t been taken there so quickly, things would undoubtedly be much worse.”

Fred or George shrugged. “Unless it doesn’t matter.”

“George,” Severus began steadily. “Then it doesn’t matter. But your father is a strong man

and won't give up the fight so easily. Now, who would like some tea?" He moved into the kitchen, ignoring their lack of response. He boiled the water with a spell and poured a cup of tea for each. He levitated them over and then sat at the end of the table opposite of Sirius and cupped his in his hands.

Harry picked his up, his hands shaking slightly, and then all the other followed suit. Sirius sipped at his, the warmth grounding him.

Fred glanced over at Severus. "You think he's going to make it?" he whispered, stricken. Severus thought for a moment, sipping his tea.

"Well, I don't know the severity of his injuries, but given the speed of medical attention and the fight in your father, yes, I think he will."

The response caused Fred to press a hand against his mouth. "Thank you, Professor," he said, muffled, and Severus nodded.

"Harry knows," Ron said suddenly, raising his gaze from the table. "Don't you?" Everyone turned to look at Harry who looked ill.

"Yeah, I saw it," he whispered.

"You saw it?" Sirius asked aghast.

Harry nodded in discomfort. "Yeah. I thought it was a dream or something, but it was too real."

"Jesus, Harry," Sirius exhaled, and Harry closed his eyes. "Are you okay?"

He shrugged. "I'm fine. I just want him to be okay."

"What…what did you see?" Sirius pressed, his eyes flicking up at Severus who stared closely at Harry.

"Umm, I was in the Ministry and going through the hallways then I saw Mr. Weasley and I…I attacked him. But I wasn't me. I was a snake; I think it was Nagini."

"Nagini?" Severus interjected. "How sure are you of that?" His voice was harsh, and Harry stared shell-shocked at him. Sirius would have told him to cut back, except for the urgency in his voice. Nagini…Sirius felt like he should know something about that…it was just there, an itch…

Oh no.

That one night in July Severus had returned bloody and bitten. Voldemort had set Nagini upon him, and they had spent an hour stitching him up.

Manually stitching him up, Sirius remembered that. Because use of magic worsened the wound. The poison fed off magic, becoming stronger and deadlier.

The Healers at St. Mungo's wouldn't know this. They would use magic just like any wizard, and Arthur wouldn't make it.

The air suddenly felt much colder and a weight pressed against his chest, paralyzing him.

"Pretty sure," Harry continued. "It was Voldemort, and it was like his mind was there, I

don’t know how to explain it.”

“And Nagini attacked Arthur?” Severus asked, and Harry nodded, paling considerably.

“Is everything okay, Professor?” Fred asked, his voice wavering. Severus stared at Harry for a moment longer, his expression unreadable.

“How long ago was this?” Severus continued, ignoring Fred.

“An hour, maybe a little longer?” Harry answered. He glanced at Fred. “Is that bad?” he asked.

Severus gripped the table and stood up. He pinched the bridge of his nose and appeared to step forward before faltering. A flicker of an emotion spasmed across his face, and Sirius just barely caught it. Fear, he thought. That looked like fear.

Severus closed his eyes and breathed deeply, the emotion gone and resolve taking its place. “Black, do you know who is at St. Mungo’s?”

“Molly, Remus, Tonks, and Minerva,” Sirius answered in one quick breath. He found he really couldn’t breathe in again, but no one needed to know. He couldn’t burden the children with this.

The room became very tense, and the children looked stricken.

Severus nodded, his expression neutral. “Your father will be okay. I’ll see to it.”

“Professor…” Fred tried again, but Severus was already out the door, his figure disappearing into the shadow.

Fifteen minutes past. Then thirty. The room was deathly quiet, except for the occasional sniffle or quiet sob from Ginny. No one looked at each other as if acknowledgment of the event would doom their father. Harry still looked like a ghost, his eyes darting around the room and shoulders tensed.

Sirius had settled on shallow breaths, but the pressure on his chest hadn’t lightened. His hands were starting to tremble too, but he clasped the chair to hide it. He desperately wanted Severus back; everything was made worse by his absence.

The clock struck three, and as it did, a whooshing came from the room with the fireplace. A few seconds later, Remus walked through, brushing ash off his coat. Dark bags hung under his eyes.

“He’s going to be okay,” he said, the statement cracking across the room. The relief was palatable, and Ron and Ginny tried to smother tears.

“Okay?” Bill asked warily.

Remus nodded. “He’ll have some scars and will need time to recover, but nothing else.”

“Oh, thank god,” Bill whispered, his shoulders shaking. “Thank god.”

“Professor Snape…” Fred began hoarsely. He coughed to clear his throat. “He was…”

“Yes. He was there. Do you mind if I sit?” he said grimly and not waiting for a reply, sat

heavily next to Sirius. He offered Sirius a small smile, and Sirius found he could breathe a little easier.

Remus drew in a deep breath. “Molly doesn’t want me to worry you, but I feel like you ought to know what had happened.”

Bill nodded forcefully. “Yes, we do. He’s our father.”

Remus nodded as if he had expected the answer and pulled out a bar of chocolate, snapping off a piece to eat. “He arrived at St. Mungo’s with multiple snake bites. It was a good thing Harry had seen it and told us so early because he had already lost a good amount of blood. The Healers tried to stop the blood loss and heal the wounds, but it wasn’t really working. It didn’t look good.” Remus broke off, choking up. “I’m sorry, maybe you don’t need to hear this.”

“We need to know,” Ginny said, her voice quiet yet firm. She rubbed at her eyes, but couldn’t stem the tears.

“We weren’t sure how much longer he had. One Healer suggested stitches, which is a Muggle invention where you essentially sew a wound together. They tried it, but the stitches weren’t working either. Then, Severus showed up. He was…well, he said he had experience with this type of wound and that they had to stitch Arthur up without any use of magic. Magic makes the poison worse. That’s why nothing was working. He can be quite formidable when he wants to, and since nothing else had worked and Molly cleared them, the head healer agreed to it.”

“But hadn’t they already tried that? The stitches?” Harry asked, sounding sick.

“Yes, but they used magic to put them in. They didn’t do it by hand. None of them knew how to do it by hand. They had never learned it, never had to do it before.”

“Severus did, didn’t he?” Sirius asked quietly, already knowing the answer.

“Yes, he did. They found one other nurse who knew how to do it, and she came later and helped. But really, he was the one. He’s been in there for almost an hour, and just sent Hannah out to tell us that Arthur would be okay and that one of us needed to tell his children,” Remus finished, his voice shaking with relief.

“Snape saved dad’s life,” Ron summarized, shocked and needing to repeat it to process.

“He said he would take care of it,” Fred said, his voice shaking. “He did, he really did.”

“What is he doing now?” Sirius asked, leaning forward slightly. God, he wanted that man in his arms.

“It sounded like he was finishing up, so he should be back soon. Your mum is going to spend the night there, but she’ll come back tomorrow morning.”

Almost on cue, they heard the floo, and Tonks and Severus walked through the door. Tonks looked exhausted, her hair a limp brown. She sunk into the first seat she saw. Severus walked slowly behind her, his shoulders tensed and hands held close to his side. He considered the chair at the far end for a moment but decided against it. He walked beside Sirius and sat next to him. His foot found Sirius’s and rested on it. His face was blank, but Sirius saw the fatigue hidden in the lines of his face.

The children all stared at Severus in awe and gratitude. He stared off distantly, almost unaware. Sirius knew that look- it was when he was exhausted and hurting. He would go into his

head, to wherever it didn't hurt, and leave just enough to function.

Sirius flashed back to how Severus entered the room, searching for any indication of pain. His hands. He was protecting his hands. If had been operating on Arthur almost singularly, with countless stitches that required absolute precision – of course, his hands would hurt. They were probably hurting quite badly too; Sirius's hands had cramped after he had done two dozen, he could scarcely imagine two hundred, if not more.

Severus wouldn't let anyone know. He would sit here blankly, accepting the children's thanks but believing it unnecessary. He would dismiss himself and curl up in the bed upstairs, ignoring Sirius because he would be just a little too far gone, and all this time, his hands would be causing him pain.

After he had saved a man's life, that was the absolute last thing he deserved.

"Your hands, let me see," Sirius ordered, ignoring how it would look. He would accredit it to his gratitude to the man, a debt paid. Severus blinked slowly and complied. After almost six months of responding to Severus's injuries and medical emergencies, they had reached a point of trust where Severus would generally listen to what Sirius ordered. Especially when he wasn't fully cognizant.

He had his hands clenched tight but they had a violent tremor. Severus looked down at them, frowning. "I couldn't—I had to," he tried to explain, but he sounded confused. "He was bleeding—I had to stop it—," he continued, still sounding confused. "It hurts," he admitted quietly, "he won't be happy." His eyes had gone from being blank to raw with emotion, and Sirius felt his heart being yanked out of his chest.

"Shh, it's okay, you did a good thing," he comforted, reaching out to grab Severus's hands. He unbent the fingers and began to massage them gently. Severus closed his eyes, his eyelids flickering.

"He's okay. Your father is okay," Severus announced, his eyes opening and staring dully at the children.

"We-we heard, professor. Thank you," George said, his voice cracking with emotion. The others repeated their thanks, voices laden with emotion and overwhelming gratitude. Severus nodded at their thanks but remained quiet.

"It was—," he began after a moment, pulling his hands away from Sirius. "Anyone would have done the same. Fortunately, he will recover. Now if you'll excuse me, I've had a long night, just like all of you." He pushed his chair backward, and Remus followed suit, standing up.

"All of us need to sleep," he said as Ron suppressed a yawn. "There's nothing more that could be done tonight."

Saying their final thanks, the Weasley's and Harry moved upstairs, their footsteps heavy. Tonks looked up at Remus and smiled softly. A look passed between them, and they soon followed after saying goodnight.

Sirius immediately turned to Severus and caught him in his arms. "You okay?" he murmured into his hair. "Do your hands still hurt? Is there anything I can do?" Severus leaned into him.

"Bed," he exhaled. "Want to sleep. With you. Long night." He shuddered, clinging onto

Sirius.

"Okay, love. I've got you now. You did a good thing tonight. And now you can rest."

He led Severus upstairs and into their bedroom. They quickly completed their nightly routine and collapsed onto the bed. Sirius spooned the man and pulled him flush against him. Severus gripped his hand and held tightly, and it didn't take them long to fall fast asleep, the fear and panic momentarily forgotten.

When Sirius awoke, Severus was gone. He didn't hear any sound from the bathroom and blearily glanced around the room to catch sight of him. Nothing. The side of his bed was still warm, so he would have only just left. But where?

It was Saturday so he didn't have class. Maybe he went downstairs to grab some breakfast?

Sirius debated going back to sleep, but it was unlikely he could with Severus gone. It was almost eight, anyway. He was as well-rested as he could expect.

He yawned, pulling himself from bed. He went to the bathroom and showered. He wished Severus would have joined him; after last night, well…he always found acts of bravery arousing. With that thought, his groin sparked and he scowled down at his growing erection. He would have to take care of himself this morning.

After he was finished and dressed, he left the bathroom and was about to head downstairs when a piece of paper caught his eye. It was on the small table in between the chairs, and Sirius recognized Severus's narrow handwriting.

He moved quickly to the table and picked up the note –

Sirius,

The Dark Lord called. Expect some sort of punishment for tonight, but I will be fine. Nothing I haven't handled before. I will return as soon as I can. Please do not worry.

Love,

S.

Two thoughts ran through Sirius's mind at the same time.

First, that Severus had said *love*, a word he struggled with ever since that one night.

Second, that this was very, *very* bad and that he could only hope Severus would return quickly to him.

Punishment

Chapter Notes

This is a dark, dark chapter. Full Archive Warnings Apply, especially about rape/non-con.

The fallout of my mild canon divergence is as follows:

(And I apologize in advance for the cliffhanger)

Severus didn't regret what he had done. He had saved a life tonight. Used his hands and skills to do something *good,* something that helped and spared people he cared about from pain. Given a choice, he would do it over and over again.

It didn't stop him from almost wishing he hadn't. He knew what would come after; of course, he did - he wasn't so idiotic to believe that the Dark Lord would condone his actions. He would have to be punished. Punished. Not played with to serve as the Dark Lord's nightly entertainment but *punished*.

He had only been punished twice in the first war, and he had done everything he could not remember what had happened to him.

The door opened, and Severus fixed his gaze to steady himself. He locked part of himself away, and the part of him that remained would handle this. Whatever the Dark Lord would do, he had survived worse. He would survive this. And then he would be back with Sirius, and it would be Christmas and he could put it in his past.

The Dark Lord entered, followed by Wormtail. His face was neutral, unreadable. He tsked lightly and closed the distance between them. He reached out to stroke Severus's hair, disregarding any personal space. He knew how much this discomforted Severus.

"Oh, Severus," he said as if talking to a small child. "Severus, Severus, Severus. I don't want to do this to you. You've been so good to me."

He remained silent, maintaining the eye contact despite it sending spikes of fear through him. The Dark Lord tilted his head and ran a finger tenderly under Severus's eye.

"Not many would do this, Severus. It is either very brave of you or very stupid."

"Saving Weasley or looking at you?" he asked, his tone reserved. He needed to know how far he could push the Dark Lord tonight—how playful he was being. It would help him prepare for later.

The Dark Lord chuckled; he was in a good mood now, but that could change instantly. "Both, my dear servant." He reached back to curl his hand into a fist in Severus's hair, his nails digging into his scalp.

"My lord…" Severus began, but he fell silent at the Dark Lord's gaze.

“Why did you do it, Severus? You could have feigned ignorance. *Should* have feigned ignorance.”

“Dumbledore would have been suspicious. Doubted me. He knew I know of Nagini’s poison and if Weasley had died without any action from me—I didn’t want to risk my position over that,” Severus explained, hoping it would be enough.

The Dark Lord considered him for a moment, looking at him with disappointment. “Maybe so, or maybe not. Maybe you are lying to me and believed saving a life would make the Light view you as a hero. Someone good and worthy of them.”

“No, my Lord,” he protested, and the Dark Lord slapped him.

“Quiet, Severus. Now, as I was saying, maybe you wanted to be accepted by them. Could that be true?” he asked lightly. Severus wanted to protest again, but he knew that wasn’t what the Dark Lord wanted. He wanted Severus to play along, and he had no other choice.

“It…It could be, my Lord,” he whispered, and the Dark Lord smiled. He stroked Severus’s face, his fingers too tender for the madness that shone in his eyes. He leaned in to whisper in his ear.

“Do you believe you could be a good person, Severus?” he asked softly, and Severus wanted to cry out. The intentions of the Dark Lord terrified him; the line of questing foreboding. Acid burned in his throat.

The Dark Lord pulled away, and Severus felt like he could breathe again. It didn’t last long.

The Dark Lord began to circle him, footsteps silent. “Do you know what it would take for me to send the Order my memories of you? You were always so eager to please me. Do you want that, servant?”

“No,” he choked out, and the Dark Lord paused behind him.

“No?” he repeated. “Do you not take pride in what you have done for me?”

Fuck, backtrack. “No, my Lord. Simply they would not trust me if they knew.”

Suddenly, his knees buckled in and he crashed to the floor. He extended his arms to catch himself and managed to suppress his yelp. His knees ached but he stayed kneeling. This is where the Dark Lord wanted him, just like so many nights before.

“Try again,” he said, anger filtering through his voice. He dug his wand into the back of Severus’s neck. He swallowed hard and thought desperately for a reply.

“I…my Lord, I am proud to serve you.” The wand dug in harder. “I am proud to serve you,” he affirmed, “But some of my actions went too far. I am not proud of that.”

“Like what?” he asked. He stayed just out of Severus’s line of sight so he couldn’t read him.

Everything, he thought. *No, no. Pick one.* “When you brought girls in and we would…use them.” The words tasted like ash, and he thought of that girl so long ago with the frightened eyes red with tears and the curve of her back. She was in her early twenties but so unbearably young, and he had wanted to end it for her. Whisper the killing curse and spare her from what was to come. That was what he had done with the others. But Lucius was watching and Crowley was staring him down, the others were starting to have doubts over him, so he did to her what had been

done to him.

Afterward, he had burned himself. Second degree burns all up his arm, but it wasn't enough. Would never be enough.

The Dark Lord dropped behind him and wrapped a hand around his throat. He blew against Severus's ear, and he whimpered softly. Maybe tonight the Dark Lord would follow through with his threat and rape him. But maybe not – the Dark Lord knew how effective the fear was, knew that keeping Severus on the precipice but not pushing him over had a far more terrible effect on him.

"Rape," his mouth curled around the word, "is a terrible thing. And you did it to that innocent girl. Do you think she felt what you felt when those men took you?"

The memories rattled in their cages, the pain only just dulled by time, and Severus was glad the Dark Lord couldn't see his face. "My lord…" he began, desperate for the words to stop and the pain to begin.

"What else?" the Dark Lord continued.

"I don't know," he forced out. He was too close, god, if he didn't know better, it could be one of the *clients* pressed behind him.

"Yes, you do." He used his other hand to stroke the back of Severus's hair while he tightened his grip on his throat. "This is why I worry about you, Severus," he said, his voice a mockery of concern. "You've spent too much time with Dumbledore and have convinced yourself that you *are* someone heroic, someone who is *good.* But you have only forgotten." He finished and stood, walking around to the front of Severus. He peered down at him, his wand still against his side. "I know you better than you know yourself. Don't forget that."

Severus shook his head. "I won't," he whispered, coughing against his dry throat. It felt like someone had lacerated his chest, but the night had barely begun.

"Now," the Dark Lord continued. "I am going to offer you a choice." He gestured towards Wormtail who scurried out of the room. He brought Severus up to his feet with a silent spell and maintained the distance. He tilted his head, considering the man. Severus closed his eyes for a moment, trying to collect himself.

The door opened again, and Severus was jolted from his attempts to ease the pain. He looked over at the door and let out a whimper. "My lord," he pleaded, but the Dark Lord only shook his head.

"You have a choice, Severus," he explained, walking over to Wormtail and the little brown-haired child he held by the wrist. The boy couldn't have been more than eight, and he stared at Severus with abject terror. He was gagged but his body shook with sobs. The Dark Lord lay a hand on the boy's head, and the boy tried to shy away from him.

"Option one, you kill dear little Henry." At his name, Henry shook violently, and Wormtail yanked hard on his wrist. He let out a muffled cry of pain. "Or you let me have my fun. I plan to keep him alive for another week if he can last. I'll let you imagine what I will do to him. It's your choice, Severus."

"My Lord, this isn't necessary," he pleaded. He raised his hands up in surrender but the Dark Lord only regarded him coldly.

“This is your punishment. You will make this choice,” the Dark Lord said, and Henry whimpered beneath him. “Kill him and prove the monster you are or let him wish you had done so.”

“My Lord,” he tried again, searching frantically for any give, but there was none. In exchange for Arthur’s life, he had sentenced a child to death. The thought was too terrible for him to bear.

Sometimes the pain became excruciating, and he would start to float. *Dissociation*, he thought, the term meaning little to him. He couldn’t be in himself right now, though, the pain was transcendent, agonizing.

He had to kill him, he thought distantly. Kill a child. Look into his eyes and take his life. A life of a *child*.

No, no, no, no, no, NO. How could he, how could he, how could he. A *child.*

But you have too, he calmly told himself. If not everything the Dark Lord does to him will be on you. Could you live with that?

So I kill Henry? Have that on *my soul?* Let Sirius love me knowing that I murdered a child? Let Dumbledore think of me as a son knowing that I murdered a child? Let Molly thank me knowing that I murdered a child?

You’ve done other terrible things. And this is one of the most terrible, but you’re sparing him. You’re destroying your already tarnished soul to spare the child. What would his parents want? To die a quick, painless death or to live in the grips of a madman who will kill him over days? It’s a kindness. A terrible, horrible, tragic kindness, but one all the same.

I can’t do it. I can’t do it. I don’t want to do it.

It doesn’t matter what you want. It’s never mattered.

The fractured conversation played out in his head as the boy continued to cry. His eyes were blue and frightened and desperate, and he was going to do it. He was going to kill the child. He was going to destroy his soul to spare that child from the Dark Lord. He would go to hell for it, no question, and that meant he would lose Sirius forever and never get to see Lily again, but he couldn’t leave that child to suffer. He didn’t want the Dark Lord to use and discard him like some plaything. His father had done it to him and it was wrong and terrible and he wished he had another choice. One where he could free Henry and return him to his parents and let him live a good, happy life free of pain.

But life wasn’t good to him either, and with tremendous self-hatred and disgust, he pulled his wand out from his pocket. The Dark Lord pushed Henry forward, and he stumbled to the ground. Severus brandished his wand but paused. He couldn’t do it like this. Couldn’t treat him as a life to throw away.

He stepped forward, each step sending razors through his heart. He crouched next to Henry, and Henry flinched.

“I’m sorry,” he began, his voice thick. He removed the gag from the boy who coughed violently.

“Please, sir, please don’t kill me, I want to see my mommy again, please,” the boy pleaded, and Severus distantly wondered why he didn’t kill the boy like a dog. The thought sent guilt

screaming through him, but these words would plague his nightmares and haunt him until he died.

Severus shushed him, and thankfully, the boy fell quiet. “It’s okay now. It’s okay,” he whispered, even though the words were lies. He gripped his wand tighter. “I won’t let him hurt you anymore.”

The boy choked on a sob. “I can’t go back to him, please sir.”

How could he ever look at himself again? How could live with himself?

“Can you think of something happy for me, Henry?” he continued, despite the anguish in his chest. It had surpassed excruciating; worse than anything the Dark Lord had ever done to him.

Henry thought for a moment and nodded. “Can you tell me about it?” he continued, and Henry looked at him hopefully. Severus wondered if it would be better to just kill himself – but then Henry would still be here and the Dark Lord would win.

“My mummy and I went to the beach, and there were all these big waves and we found a starfish and it was really squishy and I didn’t like it very much but mummy thought it was funny and laughed-“

The words were out before Severus could stop them, and the body thudded to the floor.

It started snowing as he stumbled through the streets. He only had a thin shirt, but the idea of freezing to death appealed to him. Everything would become cold and distant, the horror nothing more than a childhood nightmare, and he would slowly slip into a sleep he didn’t have to wake up from.

He thought about sitting down. A dark alley. An hour or two. Cold, but painless.

But he deserved worse.

After Henry, the Dark Lord had cupped Severus’s face, digging his nails into his cheeks. He said something, but Severus couldn’t hear him through the roaring in his head. The Dark Lord had slapped him hard, jolting him to attention. Yes, yes, he had agreed. He belonged to the dark, to the Dark Lord. He did not belong with the Light. He was not a good person, never had been or would be. No matter what he did or who he saved, he was rotten. Disgusting. Horrendous. A rapist. A child murderer.

All true. He had deluded himself over the past ten years that this was not the case, but he had been stupid. He had allowed himself to forget, but no longer. His father had been right. He was a bad person and undeserving of any kindness or love.

He would have to make Sirius see this, but it wouldn’t be hard. He could practically feel the disgust coating his skin and when Sirius realized, he would turn away with repulsion.

The Dark Lord had let him go, content with what he had achieved, and Severus had apparated away mindlessly. Some distant memory dragged him to Spinner’s End, and he wandered the streets blindly.

The torment overwhelmed him. The look in Henry’s eyes, the sound of the body hitting the floor – he couldn’t escape it. It pressed against him at all angles, and he didn’t know how his soul could bear it.

He couldn't continue like this. He had to do something to lessen the anguish. To blur Henry's frightened eyes and dull his voice.

He knew with terrifying certainty that heroin would do just the trick. But to do that would be to lose himself completely.

The sound of a bar attracted him, and he stumbled in, pushing past someone. Alcohol had seemed to serve his father well; maybe tonight it would extend that kindness to him.

"Whiskey," he croaked, summoning cash and throwing it onto the bar. The bartender looked at him warily, but the pub was a rough place. One more desperate man looking to drink himself into oblivion wouldn't be a problem.

He poured Severus the whiskey, and Severus drank it quickly. He gestured for another and the bartender complied. He would do this until he couldn't see. If he was lucky, his mind would black out the whole night.

The whiskey began to affect him, making him warm and tingly. He downed another, and he felt himself sliding from buzzed to drunk. It wasn't enough. He couldn't escape the grip of the night, a grip with piercing nails that sliced his soul apart.

Should he go see Sirius? Sirius promised he would always help, didn't he?

He laughed at his idiocy. Sirius would not help him with this. He would rightfully hate him. And then he would lose that precious love and trust they had been building, and he would be alone again and lost and in *agony.*

His breath caught in his throat. By saving a life, he had lost everything.

"Hey, do I know you?" someone asked, and it took Severus a moment to realize it was about him. The room had become bleary and his head had gained twenty pounds. He turned to the sound of the voice, blinking hard.

"Oh shit, you're Tobias's son, aren't you?" The man asked. Severus stared at him trying to piece together the details of his face. Old. Hard eyes. Crooked nose. Something rattled in his mind, but he couldn't find it. His thoughts felt dipped in tar, and he smiled, grateful that he didn't have to be cognizant anymore.

"Severus," he said, tipping forward a bit.

"Mark," the man replied, extending a hand to support Severus. He left it there. "Long night, huh?"

He didn't want to think of that, so he shrugged.

Mark huffed, leaning in closer. "Haven't seen you around in years. Not after your old man kicked the bucket."

Severus shrugged again. How nice it was not to have to think. To quiet the torment in his head.

Mark shifted, glancing around the room before focusing intently on Severus. Severus blinked. "You still…" he began, trailing off. Severus tilted his head. There was something at the edge of his consciousness, something he should probably figure out, but doing that meant thinking about Henry, and well, he didn't want to do that. Anyway, the whiskey had made everything soft.

Soft and tired. Jeez, he wanted Sirius.

"Still what?" he asked, trying to get the bartender's attention. Mark noticed and flagged him down, ordering two shots of vodka. He handed one to Severus who took it quickly. Mark never took his eyes off him.

"Another?" he asked, and Severus nodded. He could still see and that was a problem. Luckily, Henry had also become slippery, and if he tried hard enough, he could slide around it. They did another shot each, and Severus tipped forward again.

Mark caught him and pushed him back up. He knocked his knee against Severus's and then left it there. "Want to get out of here?" he asked, and Severus heard distant alarms go off in the back of his head. He wanted Sirius. But he didn't deserve him. Not tonight. Not ever again.

"And go where?" he mumbled. His mouth tasted vile, and he wanted some water.

Mark shrugged and smiled guiltily. "Wherever you want."

"Away," Severus replied immediately. He wanted to get away.

"We can do that," Mark said, his smile widening. He stood, pulling Severus to his feet. He stumbled, feeling sick, but Mark supported him. He led him outside and down a few streets. Severus tried to focus on the ground but it wasn't coming together. He tilted forward, leaning heavily on Mark.

"Sirius?' he asked, the want carving through him, but it was only Mark.

Mark took him to a dingy, dark house, and pulled him inside. "You know you were the best I ever found," he said, sitting Severus down on a musty couch. He sat down beside him and placed his hand on Severus's thigh. Severus stared down at the hand confused. That wasn't Sirius. Was he still sixteen? No, no, he wasn't. Then why…

"I fucking missed you when you disappeared. Already bad enough you only did summers," his hand crept upwards, "Never thought I'd see you again, but crazier things have happened."

"I don't…I don't think…" he tried to say, but his mouth felt like cotton and he couldn't move it properly. Mark ignored him.

"Do you remember me? All the good times we had?" he continued, and Severus suddenly felt very helpless. He should leave, he thought. He shouldn't be here. He tried to stand, but his head started spinning and he fell backward. Mark laughed softly.

"You're right. We should move upstairs, shouldn't we?"

Severus wanted to cry out, but the words were frozen. He couldn't move, couldn't think. "No," he choked out, too pitiful to bear.

"Don't be such a tease," Mark said, leering at Severus. He leaned forward so Severus could feel his breath tickling his cheek. He tried to raise his hands to push him away, but Mark caught them and held them down. He tried to pull away but he tipped too much and fell backward on the couch. Mark took the opportunity to press him down into it and bring one hand up between his legs. "God, I can't wait to fuck you," he whispered down to Severus.

His wand. He didn't have that when he was sixteen, but he did now. He could stop him. He frantically reached down to his pants, but his fingers were thick and clumsy and before he could

grab it, Mark had yanked his hands away. He held Severus's hands together on the armrest and slid one knee up to Severus's groin. He tried to pull away, but Mark was strong and he had always been one meal away from worryingly thin.

"Got some fight in ya, huh?" Mark growled, digging his knee in harder. 'We'll see about that."

"Off," he slurred "get ofva me."

Mark regarded him for a moment and smiled. "Beg a little more, why don't'cha ya?"

Severus drew in a deep breath, but the alcohol prevented any rational thought. All he felt was fear and a desperate need to get away. He wanted to scream.

Mark looked down at him and then punched him hard against his cheek. The lights exploded in his vision, and he blinked hard, disoriented. He spat blood, and the taste made him gag.

Mark took advantage of his complete helplessness to quickly carry him bridal style up the stairs and throw him onto the bed. He grabbed a piece of rope from under his bed and bound Severus's hands together. He then removed his clothes and pulled at Severus's pants, yanking them off. He searched through the pockets while Severus blinked blindly at the ceiling. He examined the thin stick of wood for a moment before throwing it into the corner.

No longer interested, he turned his attention back to Severus who lay sprawled across the bed. He was heaving violently and trying to pull his legs up to his chest. Mark reached down and pulled them back out, spreading them harshly. He dug a finger into Severus's mouth, coating it in blood and saliva. Then with steady movements, he slipped it into him.

Severus flinched at the intrusion, and much to his shame whimpered. Mark smiled harshly and slipped another in.

"You're just as fucking tight as I remember. Can't wait to sink my cock into you. I know you missed it."

Severus struggled against the bondage, his breathing erratic and pained. He tried to pull away but Mark kept him fully pinned down.

Mark climbed on top of Severus and bit a bitter kiss into his lips. "Such a good little slut," he crooned, and Severus couldn't stop the sob from welling up in him. How could his life contain so much pain? So much misfortune?

In one violent push, Mark thrust into him, and Severus bit down his scream. He needed to leave, he couldn't endure this, he had to slip away…

Rescue

"It's been a fucking week!" Sirius shouted, his fists shaking in anger. Remus put a hand on his shoulder, trying to get him to sit down.

Dumbledore regarded him with tired eyes. "I'm well aware. But there's nothing we can do. Severus must endure whatever Tom is doing."

"Please, Albus," Molly pleaded. "He saved Arthur's life. Is there really nothing we can do?"

Dumbledore shook his head somberly. "We can't interfere. Tom would only find a way to make it worse the next time. Severus has assured me of this."

"Bullshit," Sirius growled, pacing angrily around the room. "He could be dead in a ditch for all we fucking know."

Remus glanced over at him, brow crinkling. "Do we still know if he's even with Voldemort?"

Dumbledore thought for a moment and shook his head again. "He always comes to see me afterward, and I know he would want to see you again, Sirius. If he's free, I can't see why he wouldn't have come back."

"I don't know, maybe because he's fucking hurt?" Sirius shouted, his hands itching to punch something or someone. Jesus, he couldn't take it anymore.

"Could we at least see where he is?" Remus asked. "If he's with Voldemort, we let him be. Otherwise, we go find him."

"Albus," Molly tried again, "we have to do something."

Dumbledore closed his eyes and nodded. "Yes, we can do that. Thank you, Remus." He pulled out a slip of paper and drew a rough map of the UK. He pointed to an area on the upper east coast by Edenborough. "This is the area where Tom is currently at." He took out his wand, waved across the paper, and murmured a few words. A black dot bled through the paper, staining the area near Birmingham.

"Jesus," Sirius exhaled. "Let's go get him."

"Get me something of his," Dumbledore ordered. "It'll be easier to track him."

He rushed upstairs, grabbed a pen he knew Severus used, and headed back downstairs, dread and relief settling in his stomach. Just because Severus wasn't with Voldemort didn't mean he wasn't in trouble. But at the same time, to know he wasn't in the grips of that madman after a week of panic attacks and sleepless nights lifted some weight off his shoulder.

Dumbledore placed the pen on the map and cast another spell. The pen shook for a moment before settling. "I can sense where he is," he stated. "Can all of you apparate with me?"

Remus stood and Molly nodded. Sirius stepped forward. "Yes," he said forcefully. Dumbledore considered him for a moment but didn't object. He extended his hand, and the others grabbed on. A moment of the sickening turn and they landed hard on a cracked cobblestone street.

Graffiti littered the walls of the decrepit houses, and the light dusting of snow couldn't clean the street of a sense of filthiness. The house they stood in front of one was one of the better ones – at least the windows weren't broken through and the porch was only in the early stages of rotting.

"He's in there?" Molly asked quietly, her breath a white cloud. A terrible sense of foreboding came across Sirius, and he wanted to be as far away from this house and its gaping sneer.

"Appears so," Dumbledore replied, taking a step forward. Remus walked closely behind him, and Sirius followed with hesitant steps.

Dumbledore knocked but there was no reply, so he charmed the door open. The house was dark and filthy. A mouse scurried across the corner of the room and some floorboards has begun to rot through. A musty couch took up most of the space, and a flight of mismatched stairs led upstairs.

Sirius covered his mouth and nose. There was a foul smell in here; something rotten and sick.

"Merlin," Remus stated softly behind him.

"Severus?" Dumbledore called out, but there was still no reply. A thump directed their attention to the upstairs, and Sirius exchanged a look with Molly. Her eyes had darkened, and her face had twisted with worry.

They moved upstairs, mindful of the stairs and stood outside the room from which the thump had come. Dumbledore rested his hand on the doorknob, looked at all of them with piercing, cautious eyes and slowly eased it open.

Sirius heard it first before he could see it. The moans and grunts. It sounded like sex. It was sex. It was—

It was a man, old and mean-looking, gripping Severus's hips hard enough to leave bruises and pounding into him.

It was Severus with an arched back and his face buried into the pillow.

It was shoulders and skin covered in hickies and bite marks and bruises.

It was a betrayal, a scathing betrayal that burned through him. It was past his comprehension, and he stared wide-eyed and unbelieving.

The man glanced over and jolted backward. "What the fuck?" he exclaimed, turning to face them. Severus kept his face in the pillow, his shoulders shaking. "Who the fuck are you?"

There was no response; they stood speechless.

The man reached to the bedside table and pulled out a knife. "Get the fuck out," he growled, eyes flashing with rage. Dumbledore flicked his wand, and the man went flying back, landing against the wall in a heap.

"Severus?" he asked desperately, sounding unmoored. "Severus, my son."

The man continued to shake but kept his face hidden. Sirius leaned heavily against the wall,

his legs suddenly becoming far too weak. He felt sick; he was going to vomit.

His eyes darted across the room quickly to look at anything besides Severus, and his skin became ice-cold when he saw the white power dusting the nightstand. Molly let out a small cry when she saw the same. She stepped forward, reaching over to Severus and placing a hand on his shoulder.

Severus flinched full-bodily, his breaths coming out in short gasps. Molly withdrew her hand and sat next to him on the bed.

"Severus, my dear. Do you think you could look at me?" Her voice was kind and soft but terribly sad. It took a moment for him to respond, and he sat up slowly, keeping his gaze firmly fixed on the mattress. His front was just as marked and abused as his back, and Sirius felt the floor fall out beneath him when he saw the hand-shaped bruises circling Severus's throat.

Molly saw the same and let out a sound, bringing her hand to her mouth. Severus sat there, head tilted forward so his hair obscured his face. His shoulders trembled, and he continued to breathe harshly. He was naked but seemed not to care, even with Molly sitting beside him.

Sirius knew that image would haunt him for a long time, and he swallowed down bile.

"Are you high, dear?" Molly continued, seeming to collect herself. Severus dug his hand into the mattress, his chest inflating and deflating far too fast. He gave a small nod.

"Cocaine?" There was a tremor in her voice.

He nodded again, his hair still obscuring his face.

"Oh, my dear," she said sadly, brushing a strand of his knotted hair behind his shoulder. Severus flinched and tore at his lip, and the gesture caught Sirius's eye. "How about we get you home, okay? Somewhere safe."

Severus shuddered, his nails digging into his leg. He still had yet to look up.

Sirius fixated on Severus's lips and stumbled forward, driven more by the memory of that night than anything else. Severus flinched again, his nails beginning to draw crescents of blood.

"Sev-Severus," he stuttered, the image of the last five minutes burning in his mind. That night, he had been the same. The nervous gestures, the deference, the fear. What if he thought he was sixteen again? The thought caused a certain amount of relief; to think it was his Severus's choice to do this-he couldn't handle it.

"Look at me," he ordered, his voice coming out harsher than expected. Severus slowly lifted his head and met his gaze. His eyes were feverish and glazed. His pupils were dilated, his gaze unfocused. He had a nasty bruise coloring his face. He looked tired and sick.

"How—how old are you?" he forced out, and he sensed Remus shift behind him. Dumbledore watched him closely.

Severus opened his mouth to respond, worked his jaw for a moment, and shut it.

"How old?" Sirius tried again.

Severus closed his eyes. "Eighteen," he whispered. He glanced down again and wrapped his arms around him.

Remus let out a sound of surprise, and Dumbledore had become very still. Molly stared at him with wide eyes.

“Eighteen, dear?” she asked, and Severus nodded.

Sirius shook his head, and Severus must have seen it out of the corner of his eye because he flinched again.

“It’s okay,” he offered to Severus. “We’re not here to hurt you. We’re not going to do what he’s done. We just want to help.”

Severus froze for a moment, and his face twisted in confusion. “You can’t,” he muttered. He gripped at his forearms.

“Why not?” Sirius asked, but Severus only shook his head. Sirius took a step forward, ignoring the fearful hitch in Severus’s breathing. “How long have you been here?” he asked, terrified to know but desperate to ask.

“A little under a week,” Severus whispered, and Sirius inhaled sharply.

“Did your-,” Sirius broke off, unable to say the next part. To do so would be to expose Severus, but at the same time, the situation seemed to extend their normal rules. He also didn’t want to say it; while they had addressed the rape, it still chilled Sirius to the bones at the thought of any father using their son as such…

“Do you know me?” he tried again, taking another step forward. Severus stared up at him with wide eyes, his shoulders shaking. He looked like he was trying to remember something.

“Yes,” Severus whispered eventually, coughing. The cough was wet and harsh. “You’re were…” he began but fell quiet.

“A what?” Sirius asked, the words ash in his mouth. Severus only shook his head, but to Sirius, the answer was clear.

“Severus, darling, what’s going on?” Molly said, sick with concern. Severus stared at her with fevered eyes, blinking rapidly.

“I’m not…who…” he stuttered out, gripping his knees tightly. He whimpered, the sound one of the most painful Sirius had ever heard.

Sirius stepped forward, closing the distance between him and Severus. He knelt down, so he had to stare up at him. “Hey,” he said softly. “Hey, it’s okay. I know you’re scared.” Severus shuddered, looking terribly young. “We’re not going to hurt you. We want to help. Do you think you could come with us to someplace safe? We can get you a shower and some clothes and medicine and something to eat.”

Severus whimpered again, the sound piercing through Sirius. His soul ached with it. “Can’t,” he forced out. “Can’t go.”

“Why not?” Sirius asked gently. Severus glanced at him and looked away quickly. “We won’t let him hurt you.”

Severus looked frantically around the room, his eyes skittering over Dumbledore. He startled.

“Headmaster,” he said, confusion and panic coloring his face. His breathing began to grow more frantic.

“Severus,” Dumbledore said, coming closer. He kneeled down beside Sirius. “Why can’t you leave?”

“What—what—what are you doing here?” Severus continued in a shattered gasp. “How did —did you--?”

“I came to get you away from this place. You shouldn’t be here, Severus.”

Severus began to tear at his lip again, his teeth becoming discolored by the sudden bubbling of blood. “Please, I don’t know—,” he pleaded. “Oh god,” he began to moan, digging his hands into his scalp. “Does she know? Oh god, please.”

“Who, Severus?” Dumbledore asked, but Severus only began to rock back and forth.

“Lily,” Sirius answered, and the agonized groan from Severus was answer enough. “She doesn’t. She doesn’t know.” Severus continued to rock back and forth, his hands tugging at his hair. He began to mumble something under his breath. “Severus, why won’t you come with us?” Sirius tried again. He needed to get out of this house.

“He’ll…” he began, breaking off. Terror filled his voice. “Hurt…”

“We won’t let him hurt you,” Dumbledore comforted, but it had no effect on Severus.

“No. Not him,” Sirius clarified, thinking back on that night. “Lily. He’ll hurt Lily.”

Severus let out a strangled sob and pulled violently at his hair. Sirius winced, and Molly tried to untangle his hands from his hair.

“We’re not going to let that happen, Severus. I swear to you,” Dumbledore stated firmly. “I’m the most powerful wizard of this age, and I will not let him hurt her.”

Severus looked up, gulping for breath. He stared stunned at Dumbledore. “But what if—what if you can’t?” his voice was innocent and pleading.

“I can and I will,” Dumbledore reassured, maintaining eye contact with Severus. “But first, you need to come with us.”

Severus regarded him, his eyes wide and shiny. He tilted back and forth. A cough built in his throat, and he hacked it up violently. “I’m not supposed to,” he said weakly.

“C’mon darling, let’s get something to wear and some tea,” Molly soothed, rubbing circles onto his back. “A nice shower too.”

Severus brought a hand up to his mouth to smother a sob. He was quiet for a long moment and then nodded, his hair falling lankly down. “I don’t think—I’m not—I’m not feeling well,” he admitted quietly.

“We’ll take care of you now, okay? We have medicine that can help.” Molly promised, and Severus rubbed wetness from his eye, pulling at his face.

“Thank you,” he whispered, breaking into a coughing fit. Sirius’s throat ached at the sound of it.

She turned to them, “I’m going to take him to the Burrow. There’s no one there right now. I’ll get him cleaned up, something to eat.” She looked meaningfully at Sirius, who dipped his head. She turned back to Severus, comforted him again, explained what was to happen, grabbed his hand, and with a crack, they were gone.

The room was far too quiet afterward.

“What was that?” Remus asked aghast after a long beat. He began to pace around the room, running his hand through his hair. “What the fuck?”

“Sirius,” Dumbledore said, waiting for an explanation. Sirius looked up and rubbed at his stubble. A massive headache was growing behind his temples, and he felt sick from it all. His skin was crawling with ants, and he couldn’t shake the image of that man and Severus. It tore into him. He should have been here; he had promised to protect Severus. And he had fucking failed.

Kill him, the black voice whispered, and Sirius found he couldn’t argue against it. He stared hatefully at the man crumpled in the corner.

“What the hell was that?” Remus exclaimed, his footsteps echoing in the room. “Jesus, Sirius. What was wrong with him?”

“Do you remember that one night? The night that Severus thought I had raped him?” Sirius stated, his voice hard and cold. Anger and pain and desperation ate him alive, but a distant iciness tamped them down.

“Yes,” Dumbledore replied. “And with the pensive…”

“The same thing fucking happened. And I was an idiot and didn’t do anything about it.”

“About what?” Dumbledore pressured.

Sirius drew in a deep breath and stood up from his crouch. He covered his face with a hand. “That night Severus told me that when he was fifteen, his father started pimping him out for money. Continued until he was old enough to leave. Sixteen was the worst, and I think something happened to him then where some part of him got stuck there. And it comes out when he’s in a lot of pain, like with those migraines.”

“A protection mechanism,” Dumbledore elaborated, his voice hollow. “He doesn’t remember it afterward, does he?”

Sirius shook his head harshly. “No, he doesn’t. So hopefully he won’t remember any of this. But still, there’s some part in him that knows. That had to survive whatever this fucking pathetic shitface did to him.”

“His father-?” Remus forced out, “God, Sirius, this happened to him when we were at school?”

Sirius turned to face the man and clenched his hands into fists. The anger had become attuned with his heartbeat, the ice turning into fire, and the black voice screamed for blood. “You two should leave. I’ll be back when I’m finished.”

Remus reached out to him, but Sirius shook him off. Dumbledore watched him warily for a moment but didn’t comment. Sirius imagined he understood.

Instead, Dumbledore murmured a spell, and a wand flew out of the corner of the room. His

gaze threatened to break, and he turned away.

"Remus, let's go help Molly," he said softly, before apparating away. Remus looked meaningfully at Sirius before doing the same.

Sirius rolled his shoulders and stared down at the man. The rage had been building; the man had raped the one he loved, and Sirius was going to hurt him for it.

Sixteen

Chapter Notes

I love this chapter; one of my favorites of the story.

I've also started to write another Sirus/Severus fic, one that I have made good progress on and expect to post in the next week or so. It's based in the First War and starts with a fight in a bar. And then goes from there...

It'll be a mature story and neither Sirius or Severus will have any claims to moral righteousness.

With that, please enjoy the chapter. And I love seeing all your comments - thank you for them!

He had started to notice it on the fifth day he had been with Mark. The chills, the sweating, the coughing that tore at his lungs. The drugs fought it off a bit, but he always wanted to sleep, exhausted and confused. He listened to Mark and obeyed, his mind too bleary to figure anything else out.

He knew he needed medication; something was wrong. It felt like that one time when there had been three men, and he had gotten very sick afterward. His father had eventually taken him to the doctor who had prescribed medication, even though he pretended he didn't know how it happened. It was like that, and he was glad that the red-haired lady had come because he didn't know how much longer he could fight it off.

When he got to her house, she led him upstairs and into the bathroom. She closed the door and left him, and he knew he shouldn't, but he took a razor from her cupboard and sliced a few lines into his thighs. The sharp, thin pain offered a nice, welcome relief from the past week. The blood fascinated him; sometimes it was hard for him to remember it was him in this body or that he was real, to begin with, but the fact that he bled reassured him.

He climbed into the shower and let the hot water run over him. It was scalding but he didn't care. He didn't mind pain; it had been his constant companion for so long. He didn't think he even knew what a life without pain meant, and that fact amused him. He smothered a giggle and rubbed his nose; Mark had made him snort cocaine, and he could still feel it in his system, not that he minded. The cocaine felt nice and made his thoughts funny.

He stood in the shower for a while, his aching muscles relaxing. He didn't want to leave, but he felt bad. People like him didn't deserve stuff like this; he was already overextending his welcome.

He stepped out and dried himself. He kept his gaze away from the mirror; he hated to see himself. Opening the door, he noticed a set of clothes left in the hallway. He picked them up, rubbing his hands into the soft fabric. The sweater was green and soft and heavy, and there were thick sweatpants and socks. Mark hadn't let him wear anything, and he had hated feeling so bare.

He dressed quickly, the fabric feeling wonderful against his skin. It had been skin and

scratchy sheets for so long that cotton felt like a miracle. He tucked his hands into his sleeves and wrapped them around himself.

With the cocaine fading from his system, he headed downstairs. He smelled peppermint and breathed in deeply. Mum used to give him candy canes for Christmas when Father wasn't looking, and the smell conjured up memories of her.

He shook his head against the grief and wished he had more cocaine to distract his mind. He didn't want to think of her right now.

He walked into the kitchen and stared down at the floor. He needed to be submissive; he didn't know what these people wanted. Judging from the voices and feet, it was the red-haired lady and the brown-haired man with scars and the Headmaster.

The red-haired lady told him to sit, so he complied, and she placed a cup of tea in front of him. He brought it slowly to his mouth, trying to prevent his hands from shaking, and took a sip. The tea was a shade too hot but felt wonderful.

"Severus," the red-haired lady said, and he frowned at his name. "Are you feeling better? Do you need anything else?" she asked, and he panicked. He wasn't ever supposed to ask for anything but what if she wanted him too and got angry if he didn't?

He shook his head a little too quickly and suddenly felt very dizzy. Nausea clenched his stomach. Medicine. That's what he needed, but he was too scared to ask. He had a filthy disease, and he didn't think they would want to help.

"How about something to eat?" the other man said, his voice kind.

He shrugged noncommittally, and the red-haired lady grabbed some bread and butter. She handed it to him, and he took it gratefully, eating it quickly. He hadn't eaten yet that day, and it had started to hurt.

"Severus," the Headmaster began, "do you know who we are?"

Severus bit his lip. Was he supposed to know? Would they get angry if he didn't? "Headmaster," he indicated. The Headmaster still looked concerned.

"And the others?" he asked, and Severus shook his head. The red-haired lady dropped a knife and it clattered onto the table. "That's Molly and Remus," the Headmaster said, and Severus nodded in acknowledgment.

He twisted his hands inside of his sleeves and bit at the inside of his mouth. He didn't know what to do or say. They said they wouldn't hurt him, but what did that even mean? Why would they want to help someone like him?

"Severus, can I ask how old you are again?" the Headmaster continued, and Severus felt another surge of panic. He was only supposed to tell people he was eighteen, that way what he did was legal. But the Headmaster would know, wouldn't he?

"Sixteen," he whispered, trying to swallow his cough. He took another sip of the tea and winced.

"Sixteen?" the Headmaster repeated. "How…how long has this been happening for?"

"I…" he began, but the words lodged in his throat. He tried to breathe but someone had

placed clamps on his chest.

"A month?" the man called Remus asked, and Severus shook his head. He didn't look up; he couldn't stand to see anyone. "Two months? Six months? A year?" At that, Severus nodded, and Molly inhaled deeply.

"My child," Molly said, sounding far too much like Mum. The grief clawed at him again, and he needed something to distract him. He brought his hands to his lap and dug into where he had cut himself earlier. The pain reignited, blanking his mind for a moment. "You said you weren't feeling well? Are you sick?"

He had to tell them; he wasn't going to last much longer otherwise. They were probably already disgusted by him, so telling them wouldn't make it worse. He hoped so at least.

"Yes," he admitted. "Something-something from Mark maybe?" he stammered. "Or someone else? But I think it's from the-from the—"

"It's okay, dear. We'll take care of it. Remus, could you grab some painkilling medicine and perk up potion from the cupboard? It'll do for the time being, but we will have to go see a doctor. Would that be okay?" she asked Severus. He felt her staring at him, and he shifted uncomfortably.

"You don't—don't have to take care of me," he protested weakly. He wasn't deserving of help. "I'm not—not worth…"

"Severus, we *want* to take care of you. And you are worth it," Molly reaffirmed, and Remus placed a potion and a pill in front of him. He tried not to look too closely at the pill; a client had made him take one once, and it had been very bad what had happened next. He took both quickly, suppressing the panic.

He wrapped his arms around his chest and shut his eyes. No one wanted to help him. It was a lie. He didn't know why they were lying to him about it unless…

"Okay," he agreed. "Okay. I won't be good until afterward but you can use me as you like then." His voice sounded steady. This was familiar to him. He would repay them in the way he knew how.

Molly looked aghast, and the Headmaster drew in a sharp breath. "No," Molly protested. "That's not what we want. No one here will touch you without your consent."

Severus furrowed his brow. Consent didn't mean anything to him; he didn't own his body in the first place. It belonged to whoever wanted it. "No," he tried to clarify, getting confused. "No, you can use me. That's how I'll repay you. Please," he struggled to explain, "If you help me, I have to repay you. And this is how-how I can do it."

The room got very silent, and Severus began to panic. Maybe he wasn't supposed to be upfront about it? Maybe they wanted him to pretend that wasn't the case?

"Severus," Molly began, sounding strangled.

"Severus," the Headmaster tried. "We'll find another way for you to repay us. But not through that, okay?"

"Okay," Severus agreed, unable to tell if they were lying. It would be nice to think that no one would touch him, but he couldn't make sense of it. At least one of them would want it from

him, and he would let them do as they wished.

The room fell silent, no one quite sure what to say. Severus bit at his bottom lip and twisted his hands inside the sleeves. Questions bubbled within him, but he wasn't sure if he was allowed to ask.

"What is it, dear?" Molly asked, still sounding very sad. Severus hoped it wasn't because of him; she seemed nice, and he didn't want to cause her pain. He took it as permission to ask.

"How-how did you-you find me?" he stammered, glancing quickly upwards. No one responded for a moment.

"We thought you might be in trouble," the Headmaster responded, his voice grave. "We tracked you down to check and found you."

"Oh," Severus whispered.

"If you had left…" the Headmaster began, swallowing hard. "If you had left, would your father have hurt Lily?"

Severus squeezed his eyes shut and nodded.

"Is that why you haven't told anyone?" he continued, and Severus didn't respond. He kept his eyes shut and his breathing became increasingly shallow. He couldn't risk it. He couldn't risk telling someone and his father finding out. Even if it wasn't Lily, he would hurt her mother or sister, and he couldn't live with something like that.

"Yes," he eventually said when the silence became unbearable. "Yes."

"And she doesn't know?" Molly asked softly, and Severus shuddered.

"No, please. I can't…she can't know."

"It's okay. We won't tell her," Molly comforted, and Severus took another shaky sip of the tea.

The door swung open, and the black-haired man stormed in. His fists were bloody and torn, and Severus stared blankly at them, uncomprehending. Remus stood up and cursed, rushing over to the black-haired man. He grabbed his fists and cursed again, and the man grimaced. Remus shook his head and walked over to the cupboard to grab gauze.

"Sit," he ordered, and the black-haired man listened. However, instead of sitting next to the others, he chose the seat next to Severus. Severus froze, waiting for a hand to rest on his knee.

Remus sat across from him, grabbed the black-haired man's fists and began to tend to them. The black-haired man hissed out a curse, and Severus flinched. There was something unnerving about this man. In the room, he had looked at him like he knew far more than he should. His gaze had peered through him, cut away his protections and made him even more vulnerable.

"What's happening?" the man said, and Severus became very still.

"He's sixteen," Remus explained. "He's not feeling well so we gave him some medication. Do you want to introduce yourself to him?" The sentence felt far heavier than it should be, and Severus tried to shrink into himself. He didn't want the black-haired man's attention; Severus didn't think he could hide from him.

“Shit,” he mumbled, turning to Severus. “I’m Sirius.” Severus nodded, staring down at his lap. “Do you could think you could look at me?” Sirius asked, and Severus didn’t want to. However, he was in their house, they had given him food, and he had to be obedient.

He looked up quickly, making brief eye contact before turning away. He couldn’t discern the look in Sirius’s eyes. It troubled him.

“That’s a start,” Sirius said, sighing. “What happened to you?” he asked, rubbing his neck. He sounded sad and beaten. Severus didn’t reply. “You were with him for a week, right? Do you remember how you got there?”

Severus thought back for a moment and shook his head. He couldn’t really remember it; things were fuzzy and when he was at home, days and events would blur together into an indistinguishable mess. “I was at home, I think,” he tried slowly. “And then my father must have… must have brought me to Mark, but I don’t know. It’s sometimes hard for me to remember,” he admitted quietly.

“Mark?” the Headmaster asked, and Severus glanced up at him, noting the lines around his mouth. He looked older than he last remembered.

“That’s okay, Severus. How long do you think you’ve been home for?” Sirius continued.

“A few weeks, I think?” He blamed the pain for the gaps in his memory. “I…you were there…one time…I think,” he said slowly, trembling slightly. Maybe Sirius would hurt him for letting out that secret, but he had to say something. He had to know if he wasn’t making that up.

“Yeah, I think I was,” Sirius responded, sounding distant. “I didn’t mean to touch you, Sev. I should never have…”

“You can have me again if you’d like,” he offered, looking up hopefully. If Sirius wanted to use him, then he would understand these people’s motivations. He wouldn’t feel so unmoored.

Sirius looked sick. “No, no, never. Never like that.”

“I don’t mind,” he said softly, knowing he had made a mistake. He itched for some level of pain for punishment. The cuts in his legs weren’t enough.

“I…we don’t want you like that, Severus. Do you believe me?” he asked, deeply concerned. Severus still didn’t understand where this emotion was coming from; why would he, let alone anyone, care about him?

“Okay,” he agreed, but he remained tense. He no longer believed in trust; not after he had seen it betrayed over and over again.

Sirius struggled for words, pulling his bandaged hands away from Remus. “You don’t have too…you can do as you like, Severus.”

He frowned, the words far too uncomfortable to consider. Do as he liked? He didn’t have that choice at home; it didn’t even remotely apply. He did what his father wanted. He did what the clients wanted. He didn’t do what he wanted. That wasn’t for him; he didn’t have that freedom.

His breathing became strangled, and he only noticed himself tearing at his lip when he tasted blood. Sirius noticed because he grasped Severus’s face between his hands and used his thumb to pull his bottom lip down. He stared at Severus panicked, his shoulders tense. Severus stared back in fear. The hands felt nice on his face, and he struggled to understand why.

"You've gotta stop that. You can't hurt yourself like that."

Thank god, orders. He could follow directions, do what Sirius wanted. That was what he knew how to do, what his father had trained him for. Sirius's brow furrowed as a thought struck him.

"Are you in pain? Do you have any injuries?" Sirius demanded, removing his hands and staring intently. Severus looked down at his lap; he had to tell Sirius, but he was oh so frightened. Always frightened.

"We gave him some pain medication," Molly answered. "He's sick, so we have to take him to Poppy."

"Like a fever?" Sirius asked, and Severus wanted to curl up in shame. "He was coughing earlier. Could he have pneumonia? It could have gotten cold in the house, and if he wasn't wearing anything…" The thought made him look sick.

Molly shook her head. "An STD, dear. But we'll have to check for the others too."

Severus started to dig his hands into his lap again; he could feel a wetness on his thighs, but he needed the pain. Anything to distract him from what he felt in his head. Sirius was silent, his hands shaking. He swallowed and swallowed again.

"Anything else?" He asked, not looking at Severus.

"Yes," Severus admitted quietly. If they were going to take care of him, he owed them obedience. Even if he didn't want anyone to know.

"Yes? What?" Sirius asked, turning to look at Severus and gripping the sides of his chair. Molly let out a small sound.

"My…my legs. My thighs…" Severus gestured, shame and guilt making his sick.

"What's wrong? What can we do?"

"I…" Severus began, staring at Sirius's side. For some reason, he wanted those arms around him, holding him close. He couldn't fathom why; the thought of wanting someone to touch him frightened him. "I…cut…myself…in the bathroom." The words stumbled out, jittery and broken. He moved his hands back into his lap by habit and began to twist down; Sirius reached out quickly and held his hands, rubbing gently with a thumb.

"Why Sev?" Sirius asked, his voice devastated. Severus blinked rapidly, trying to keep the tears out of his eyes. He wasn't very successful but at least he could keep them silent; after what his father had done when he had been too loud…

"Because it hurts," he mumbled, and Sirius let go of one hand to brush the tears away. It only made him cry harder. The soft touch made him want to say more; he wanted to trust in Sirius and find some way to ease the pain. "And-and I don't w-want to feel what h-he did."

"Oh, darling," Molly said softly, reaching out to gently hold his other hand. "Oh, my child." Severus shied away from her and broke into silent sobs. With his eyes shut that could be Mum and he couldn't-he couldn't-

"Hey, hey, what's wrong?" Sirius asked, his voice low. Severus shook at the sound of it; it felt steady and secure and kind – everything he wanted but didn't, couldn't, would never have.

“M-m-my m-mum,” he forced out through the sobs. He bent forward, curling into himself. The room was silent, and Molly started to say something when Sirius interrupted.

“You miss her, don’t you?” The tone was unbearably kind, and he leaned into Sirius’s hand. Silent sobs racked his body, and with a sickening feeling, he knew he would owe them anything after his. He would have to give them something in return, whether it be his obedience or body or anything else they desired. The thought made him cry harder; he knew he was only a thing to be used for other’s pleasures, but he was so tired, tired of the pain and grief and the feeling of dirt on his skin.

God, he wanted his mum.

He pulled his hands away and buried his face in the sleeves of the green sweater. He had to stop; he knew they would hurt him if he didn’t. That was what his father would do. He started to count. By ten, he had to stop.

One. Two. Three. Four. Five.

He pushed through the pain, turning it from something sharp and bright to a dull, endless agony.

Six. Seven. Eight.

He gulped a few breaths and tried to turn the fear from something debilitating to something useful. He was terrified, yes, but he had to hide it. Everyone hurt him more when he showed it. His father always did and some clients reveled in his fear, doing everything they could to drive him farther. If he hid it, they would sometimes not hurt him so badly.

Nine. Ten.

He rubbed the rest of his tears from his face and looked up, staring dully. His face had smoothed out and felt empty. He felt a little distant from himself. There was the pain and fear, of course. He was never without it, but it wasn’t going to impact his body. He had taught himself how to do this – to keep his body still and quiet while screaming himself hoarse in his head.

He held himself still and waited for someone to speak. They all stared at him wide-eyed, and he tried not to think about what they would say.

“Severus,” the Headmaster began, “are you okay?”

“Yes,” he said emotionlessly. He held himself as still as he could, resisting the urge to bite his lips. “I’m fine.”

“Fucking hell,” Sirius cursed, staring wildly at Severus.

“Severus, dear,” Molly tried, and he only distantly registered that she sounded like his mum. It wasn’t something he needed to think of right now. She looked at a loss for words.

“Hey,” Remus followed, leaning forward. His soft brown eyes crinkled with concern, and Severus couldn’t tear himself from them. “It’s okay to cry. We won’t get angry.” The dam holding back the pain fractured, and he looked away to stop it from breaking. “Does your father get angry when you cry?” he asked gently, and Severus gripped his armrest.

“Yes.” He had to be empty. The pain had to be kept distant, away from his body.

“Does he hurt you if you cry?” Remus continued, and Severus flinched. Shh, shh, don’t think of it. Don’t think of the cellar and the rats and the darkness and the –

“Yes,” he repeated, his voice sounding far away. He wanted Remus to stop.

“Does he hurt you a lot?” Remus asked, and Sirius shifted beside him.

“I don’t want to talk about it, please sir.” There were small fractures forming in the dam that help the pain back. It had never been threatened with kindness before.

“Okay, okay. We don’t have to talk about it. But we’re not your father, Severus. None of us are going to hurt you.”

He wanted to believe them. He wanted to believe them so badly, but he couldn’t afford to be wrong. His head was also starting to hurt badly, and he wanted to lie down. He hoped they would be kind enough to give him a blanket; he slept without one often enough, but he craved the feeling of being warm and safe. Maybe he could get Sirius to hold him for a moment. He imagined it would feel nice.

“Is there anything we could do to convince you of that?” the Headmaster said, clearly not believing Severus’s lackluster response. Severus shrugged, looking back down into his lap.

“What is it?” Sirius asked, reaching out to hold of one of his hands. He rubbed his thumb on the side of Severus’s hand, and Severus gazed at it expressionlessly. “Severus?”

Empty. He had to be empty. Ignore the anxiety and fear as much as he could. “What do you want from me?” he stated dully, continuing to stare at Sirius’s hand. A good question, he thought. They wanted something, and he would have to give it to them.

“We want-,” Sirius began, but Dumbledore held up a hand. He paused, as if considering something, and then pushed forward with it.

“We believe you would offer a valuable contribution to the efforts of the Light. You are intelligent and skilled at potions, and we would like you to help us defeat Voldemort. You don’t have to answer now, but that is what we want from you.”

The words took a moment to sink and then Severus stared at him wide-eyed, mouth slightly agape. He tightened his grip on Sirius’s hand without realizing it. “I-yes. I can help. I w-would like to help.”

“Severus,” Molly started to protest, but Severus shook his head sharply. He wanted this; it meant he didn’t have to go back to his father and that he didn’t have to join the Death Eaters. It was an alternative, a way out that he had been praying for.

“I want to be useful, please,” Severus continued, emotion streaking his voice. “I don’t,” he breathed in deeply, trying to settle himself and hide his desperation, “I don’t want to go back. I *can’t* go back. And I only…I only know Lucius so I was going to—but this is better, please. Please, let me help.”

Dumbledore looked stricken, and Molly covered her mouth with her hand. “Of course,” Dumbledore said, his voice pained. “Of course you can help.”

“Thank you, sir.” Sirius’s hand was still on his, and the grip made him feel safe. He still wanted to feel his arms wrapped around him; he hadn’t been genuinely hugged since when he started to shy away from Lily. And even before then, they were still sparse. Only his Mum and

Lily ever wanted to do so.

He settled back in his chair, a yawning relief opening in his chest. He had an answer now, thank god. He knew what they wanted from him, and he would happily give it. The situation had stabilized – he didn't have to worry about them dragging him upstairs and throwing him on a bed anymore. And they did all seem so kind, Remus and Molly especially. And even though Sirius still frightened because he knew too much, he exuded a sense of safety and concern that Severus wanted to melt into.

"Severus," Sirius said, and Severus turned to him. He stared blankly at him, a mask now entrenched on his face. "Severus," he repeated, his eyes desperate. He leaned forward a fraction before seeming to get hold of himself. "We also want you to feel safe. That no one here is going to hurt you. And I know you don't think that."

Severus thought for a moment. It would be nice to provide an explanation, and he distantly regarded his life like watching a movie through sheets of glass. "Everyone hurts me," he said simply.

"Intentionally?"

"Most of them," he clarified. "Lily and my…my mum didn't. But most everyone else."

"When was the last time you felt safe?" Sirius continued, shifting forward. His voice threatened to break with emotion, and his eyes never left Severus's face. Severus stared back into them, and they were dark and warm and sad and kind, most of all kind, why was everyone so kind to him? The dam cracked, and Severus gasped at the sudden influx of emotion. He shut his eyes, desperate to hide it.

"Umm…" he stumbled out, "I…I, it's been a while. When I was with Lily at the pond, I think. Or there's a room in Hogwarts where no one can find me, so maybe that. You-," the word came out unbidden and for an unknown reason. He liked how Sirius touched him, but he did not feel safe here.

"Me?" Sirius asked quietly. Severus furrowed his brow.

"Your hands feel nice," he whispered, but it made no sense to him. "I'm not-not sure why."

Sirius squeezed his hand and brushed a strand of hair behind Severus's ear. His hands were rough and strong, but most of all, they were gentle. He struggled to think of them hurting anyone, but there had been blood on them. He could hurt others, but with Severus, he was gentle. A small voice in his head told him it was only time before they hurt him too, but he tried not to dwell on it. Everyone hurt him at one point or another, so he might as well enjoy this small act of tenderness.

His eyes flickered shut as Sirius brushed gently through his hair. His mouth twisted down briefly as he kept himself from asking for more. It scared him; he despised most, if not all, contact. He liked Lily and his mum's but everyone else caused him pain and made his skin feel sticky.

Not Sirius though. It made his skin feel warm and made him sleepy.

"It's nice," he murmured as Sirius ran another hand through his hair. This did make him feel safe, he thought. If only his head would stop hurting.

"You are safe, Sev. I won't let anyone hurt you," Sirius promised, and Severus huffed, coughing slightly. It was a nice thought, one he wished was true.

Sirius wrapped an arm around his shoulders and started to pull him lightly into his chest. Severus remained pliant and shifted so that he leaned against Sirius's chest. He buried his face into the crook of his shoulder, inhaling the smell of old books. Sirius wrapped his arms around him, holding him close.

Normally, this meant that hands would start wandering and it was only a matter of minutes before Severus was undressed and sucking the man's dick or whatever else he wanted. Being close to someone, anyone, always meant sex.

But all Sirius did was hold him and whisper kind words in his ear. His arms were strong and his hands firm, and he rubbed small circles into his back that seemed to ease the bruises. Severus gripped onto the front of his shirt, desperate for it not to end. Sirius made him feel safe as if someone *could* protect him from the horrors of the world.

He settled into him, trembling slightly. He also started to feel himself doze off, his eyes sliding shut and mind becoming foggy. He thought he should fight it, that it would be rude to fall asleep in his arms. But at the same time, he was so tired. Mark had snored, and he had been so cold, and the nightmares always tormented him. He didn't think Sirius snored, though he wasn't sure why he felt so certain about it.

He wasn't sure of anything about Sirius, but the man made him feel safe and protected and comforted, and with that thought, he slipped into the darkness.

Winter

Chapter Notes

> Keep any eye out for my new fic - it's titled Used to the Darkness and its a dark, First-War based story featuring our two favorite characters. I started off with a pretty straightforward premise and morphed into quite a complicated story - I'm anticipating about 15-20 chapters of First-War drama.
>
> Of course, Sleepless continues onward and continues to deal with the fallout of the Voldemort's punishment. Please enjoy, and I appreciate all of the comments, kudos, and of course, the wonderful silent readers (of which, I find myself often).

Sirius felt Severus relax against him, his breathing steadying in the hallmark of sleep. He pressed a kiss against the top of Severus's head, fighting against the taste of bile in his mouth. He felt sick, disgusted at himself, and beating the man's face to a pulp hadn't helped.

He had failed Severus.

Failed him in a way that was unspeakable. In a way that surpassed horrific, in a way that plunged him into the worst of what Azkaban made him feel.

He had promised to protect the man, to keep him as safe and unharmed as possible. He couldn't stop Voldemort, but he was supposed to stop everything else. That was the *point.*

And he had fucking failed. He had left Severus alone with a monster for a week, let that monster commit atrocities to the man he loved, and he had sat at home worrying. Doing *nothing.*

He felt shredded by the self-hatred; his skin hung as thin, bloody slivers, his insides cut apart every which way. His hands spasmed, and that black voice started whispering, promising much worse when he was alone again.

Sirius desperately cast his gaze across the room, searching for a distraction. His gaze settled on Remus, who looked as if he had realized something too horrible to express. Sirius felt a twinge of empathy; he had felt the same.

It was the realization that they had pushed someone already choking on mud father into the dirt. It was the realization that they had played a very direct role in tormenting someone suffering horrific atrocities. It was the realization that they had *bullied* a boy while he was being tortured and humiliated, that really all that boy had probably ever wanted was some easing of the pain and that they ensured that never happened.

It was enough to make one want to die, and he pitied Remus for it.

Sirius couldn't stand to look at Remus anymore, so his gaze flickered over to Molly. She looked heartbroken, and Sirius couldn't help but think of finding out this had happened to his child. That was how she looked at Severus – a mother's love broken by the cruelty of the world. It hurt to look at her; Sirius was the one supposed to protect the person she regarded as her child, and he had failed her terribly.

Sirius drew in a deep breath and tightened his grip around Severus. The man still slept peacefully, his hands clutching gently at Sirius's shirt.

"Sirius," Albus said gravely. Sirius tore his gaze from Severus and met his eyes. His eyes, like Molly's, were impossibly sad. But there was also a weary resignation in his gaze that made Sirius pause.

Sirius let out a small sound, careful not to disturb Severus.

"How he did get out of this last time?"

Sirius shook his head. "I don't know," he whispered, "I was downstairs."

He may just sleep it off," he mused, his gaze narrowing on Severus. He looked back at Sirius. "And he didn't remember, yes?"

Sirius blinked, making sure he read Albus correctly. "We have to tell him," he stared blankly.

"Sirius," Albus began, "it will not help him."

"Help him?" Sirius hissed, "So we lie to him? Pretend everything's okay?"

Albus looked grave, his blue eyes piercing. "No, I suppose not. I simply want to spare him of this. He has suffered enough."

"Yes, he has," Sirius spat, his voice rising for a moment. Severus stirred against him. He closed his eyes, trying to collect his thoughts. "He will hate that you know. But it will hurt him more if he finds out later. And I can't lie to him, Albus. Maybe you can, but I can't."

Albus nodded. "It looks as if he is waking."

Indeed, Severus was. His grip had tightened on Sirius, and he stirred, stretching. He blinked his eyes blearily, mumbling something.

After a few moments, consciousness cut through to him and he tensed, pulling away from Sirius. He glanced around, reaching blindly for his wand, only to find nothing. He froze, but then his gaze settled on Molly, and he stared confused.

"Molly?" he asked, and Sirius felt a shock of relief – his Severus was back. He wouldn't stare at him with unknowing eyes.

"Severus, dear," Molly choked out, offering a weak smile. "Are you alright?"

Severus's brow crinkled, and he glanced down at his lap. Sirius watched him closely; his expression was open if confused, but then something came across him, and he shut down. The look in his eyes hardened, and his mouth drew tight.

"What happened?" he asked, his voice reserved. The stark difference in character shook Sirius, and he struggled to reconcile the man in front of him with the damaged boy from earlier.

"Oh, Severus," Molly began. "I-," her gaze shifted over to Sirius, and Severus followed it. He stared at Sirius, and something in his gaze softened ever so slightly.

"Sirius," he began slowly, "What is happening?"

Sirius sighed, running a hand through his hair. Guilt weighed heavily on him, and a part of him wished he had chosen Albus's avenue of action. But he owed it to Severus. "It's a long story. And not a good one. What's the last thing you remember?"

Concern flitted across the mask of Severus's face, and he thought for a moment.

"I was with the Dark Lord. Because of Arthur. And he-," his voice cut off, and he started to blink rapidly. His mouth turned down in a frown, the lines on his face deepening.

"Severus," Sirius said softly. Severus stared at him, his gaze troubled. His fingers gripped the armrests, and he glanced to the side, swallowing hard. "You're safe now, okay?"

Severus shook his head slightly and glanced down at his lap. His brows furrowed, confusion flitting across his face.

"Hey, look at me," Sirius said softly, reaching out to stroke Severus's cheek. Severus caught sight of the hand, and instead of allowing Sirius to do what he had done so many times before, he violently threw himself out of the chair and stumbled backward.

Panic settled into the steely lines of his face, and he swallowed hard, stepping backward.

"My wand," he said, and Sirius could hear the tremor in his voice.

"Severus," Albus began, but Severus just shook his head. Albus fell silent and removed the wand from his pocket. Severus summoned it from his hand, his knuckles whitening from the grip.

Molly stood to speak, but Severus stepped towards the door, determinedly avoiding their eyes. "I should go," he muttered and in one swift movement, stepped outside and closed the door behind him.

Sirius stared at the tarnished wood, his hands held uselessly in front of him.

"One of us has to go after him," Molly said, her voice trembling. "He shouldn't be alone."

"I-I should go," Sirius said, standing up on shaky feet. He felt sick and whiplashed; the events of the past few hours had tested him, and he had performed miserably. No one objected, so Sirius followed Severus out the door.

He listened for the crack of apparating, but the house remained silent, meaning Severus was still here. Sirius considered where Severus would have gone- the house, while not large, had a good amount of areas to hideaway.

But Severus—Severus wouldn't want to be inside. Not after what had been done to him.

Sirius strode to the door, braced himself for the weather, and stepped outside. A light dusting of snow covered the ground, but otherwise, everything was brown and dead. The cold cut through Sirius's light shirt, and he shivered. He scanned the yard, looking for any sign of Severus.

There was a large tree about ten meters from the house, and it looked as if footprints had disturbed the snow. Sirius followed them and found Severus curled up against the base of the trunk, his head buried in his knees and his hands gripping his head. His shoulders were shaking slightly, indicating he was crying, but otherwise, he was completely silent.

Sirius crouched to his knees, maintaining some distance from Severus. Clearly physical contact was off the table, and Sirius wouldn't pressure him. He cracked a stick to indicate his

presence, and Severus jolted upwards, whipping out his wand and pointing it at Sirius. His hand trembled for a moment before he lowered it. His eyes were red with tears and his face with the cold, and he looked haggard and beaten.

"What's wrong?" Sirius asked, feeling completely out of his depth. Severus drew in a breath and closed his eyes. He didn't answer for a long time, and Sirius rubbed his nose as it began to run. He waited, though. There was no rushing this.

"We-," Severus began, seeming to choke. He squeezed his eyes shut and gripped at the frozen earth. "I'm sorry. We can't do this anymore."

"Huh?" Sirius said, the words not processing. "Do what?"

Severus gestured blindly in his direction, and Sirius felt his stomach sink. The dark voice reared its ugly head, and the cold wasn't fucking helping.

"What do you mean?" Sirius continued, sitting heavily on the ground. The snow wet his pants, and he couldn't imagine a more miserable place to have this conversation. Except for Azkaban, of course.

"I-," Severus began, breaking off. "I-I can't do this."

"Why, Sev?" Sirius asked, failing at keeping the worry and desperation out of his voice. Severus flinched and turned away. "God, I know what that man did to you, Sev. But I still love you. Of course, I do. I'm just so sorry I wasn't there to stop it. I promised to keep you safe, god, Sev. You're everything to me." The words tumbled out, and Sirius couldn't see Severus's face to gauge his reaction.

"Don't fucking say that," Severus hissed, his body tense. He looked at Sirius, his eyes flashing hatred and anger. "Don't *fucking* say that."

"Then what? Sev, I can't lose you like this. Please." It felt like cell walls had started to close in on him again, and everything felt so damned cold.

See. I told you.

Shut up.

Severus covered his mouth with his hand and shook his head, his hair falling in front of his face. "I-I don't," he choked, his hand smothering the sound. Sirius so desperately wanted to reach out and touch him, but he felt that would only worsen the situation.

"Sev, please tell me what's wrong," Sirius pleaded, shifting closer to the man. His teeth started to clack together as he shivered, and he wrapped his arms around himself.

"C-can't. I'm sorry," he whispered, his eyes meeting Sirius's for a brief moment. The anguish within them threatened to break Sirius, and he felt his heart splintering.

"Okay," Sirius said, trying to ground himself. Maybe everything wasn't lost, after all. He only had to figure out what had gone so terribly wrong in the past week – even more than what he already knew. But first, he had to get out of the cold. "Let's move inside, okay," he asked, and Severus watched him warily, exhaustion marring his face. "The cold—it's not good—reminds me of…"

Sirius stood, and after a few moments of hesitation, Severus followed. He smothered his

sigh of relief; there was hope to salvage their relationship. They crossed the yard and walked back into the warmth of the house. They stood in the entrance, and Sirius gratefully shut the door behind them. He rubbed his arms, desperate to warm up, but the cold ran deeper than his skin.

Severus leaned heavily against the wall, his face downcast and eyes hidden in shadow. He clenched his hands and held firmly onto his wand. The silence stretched, and Sirius stood petrified.

"This…this has to end," Severus said, his voice scarily empty. Sirius felt like he had been punched in the gut.

"Why?" he asked, trying to sound more in control than he felt.

Severus's shoulders shook, and he used his free hand to rub his arm. "I don't--," he choked, falling silent.

"You have to give me a reason," Sirius demanded. He could understand if Severus had a reason. It would break his heart, of course, but it wouldn't *kill* him. Not like this.

"I'm not—not what you think I am," Severus said quietly, and Sirius tilted his head.

"Then what are you?" he asked, softening his voice. Severus had said the same in reaction to the rapes, and Sirius understood it stemmed from his self-hatred. God, he felt the fucking same.

"B-bad," Severus stuttered, his voice dropping. Sirius reeled at how much agony laced that word.

"What happened, Severus?" Sirius asked, staring imploringly at Severus. Severus glanced up, but he looked away from Sirius as if burned. No response, so Sirius had to try something else. "You're not a bad person, Severus," who let out a bitter, broken laugh. "You're not good, either," Sirius continued, "You're just a person. Who's done both. And I'm—I'm like that too. We all are."

Severus let out another shaky laugh and shook his head. "Not like this," he shot back, hatred lacing his voice. The words worsened Sirius's nausea, and he pressed his hands against the wall to steady himself.

"Like what?" Sirius pressed, and he could almost hear the internal fight between each of Severus's breaths. "You tell me, Sev, and I'll give you back that necklace, okay? But you can't leave without letting me know why."

The promise seemed to win the fight in Severus, and he met Sirius's eyes once again.

"The Dark Lord-," Severus began, his voice strained. His knees gave out, and he sunk to the floor. Sirius followed. "He-um-you know what he had to do."

"Because of Arthur," Sirius reaffirmed, flashing back to that brief spasm of fear on Severus's face as he decided whether or not to help. Severus nodded, his shoulders tense.

"I wasn't supposed to do that. I'm not one of you," he admitted, "And the Dark Lord—I wasn't supposed to forget that. That I'm not a part of the light." Severus broke off, and he breathed haggardly. He continued after a long moment.

"I didn't want to do it. But that's why we can't do this anymore. I'm not one of you. I don't deserve this. Not you. Not any of this." The words fell from Severus's mouth in a violent stream, and Sirius could only watch in silence. Once the dam opened, it didn't seem like the torrent would end. "I had to do something *terrible.* A child, Sirius. God, only a child. But he said if he didn't, he

would hurt him, and I couldn't bear that either. Not after—."

"Severus," he interjected, reaching out to grab Severus's hand. Severus looked at it pained but didn't pull away. "Severus," he repeated helplessly.

"Please don't look at me like that," Severus pleaded hoarsely. "You don't understand. What I've done—and then to think I deserve something like this," he laughed out harshly before breaking into a sob.

Sirius desperately needed to say something, but his mind had blanked. Words needed to comfort Severus had fled, and frustration burned in his chest. "I-," he tried. A thought struck him. A possible angle. "Sev, did you *want* to do it?"

Severus paused. He stared at Sirius aghast, his eyes wide with the horror of the thought. He shook his head. "I don't—."

"That's the difference, then. You didn't want to do it, not like Voldemort or the other Death Eaters. That matters, Sev. To enjoy it is to be evil. And you just didn't have a choice—."

"I always have a choice," Severus hissed, his gaze heated. "Always. And I still fucking did it. The things I have done…"

"But you've also chosen to do good things, Sev," Sirius countered. He couldn't shake the feeling that he was losing this conversation, and by losing it, he would lose Severus.

Severus scoffed and ran a hand over his face.

"I mean, Severus, what you did," Sirius fumbled. "It was either you or Voldemort, right? You do something terrible, or you let Voldemort do something even worse, so it was mercy what you did. Either that or, I mean, maybe it *was* a choice, but a choice of either letting the child be god knows what or letting him die dignified. Painlessly, right? I would have—have wanted that for my child. So I know it's terrible what you've done, but it was done with kindness and mercy."

Severus watched him, eyes wide.

"And I know you don't think you deserve this. Shit, I don't think I do either. But there are a lot worse people who have gotten far more, and I just think, despite everything, we should be able to have something good too."

"Sirius," he said brokenly. "Sirius."

Sirius took it as his cue to cross the hallway and pull Severus tightly into a hug. The man buried his face into the crook of Sirius's neck, his shoulders shaking. Sirius stroked Severus's hair and pressed a kiss to his forehead. They remained like that for a while, fortunately undisturbed, until Severus, seeming to recollect himself, apparated them away to Grimmauld.

They led each other to bed and held each other close, waiting for sleep to ease their pain.

"Sirius," Severus whispered, "I'm sorry."

"Shh, I know," Sirius comforted, running a hand through Severus's hair. "We'll talk about it in the morning, okay my love?"

Severus shuddered against him but fell silent. Eventually, they relaxed against each other, sleep holding them in its soft embrace.

Dawn

Chapter Notes

As dawn beings to break...

“Good morning,” Sirius mumbled, stretching his hands above his head. He felt wonderfully warm, a much-needed change from yesterday. “Sleep okay?”

Severus blearily shrugged against him.

Sirius pressed a kiss against the crown of Severus’s head, regretfully threw himself out of bed, and went to take a shower. Severus remained, blankets pulled up to his chin and head buried in a pillow.

When Sirius returned, Severus still hadn’t moved. However, he now radiated with tension, his shoulders drawn together and his hands clenched around the blanket. Sirius regarded him for a minute, nerves twisting in his stomach. They were about to have a conversation that Sirius was in no way ready for, and the idea inspired sickening anxiety.

He moved back to the bed and sat, resting his head against the headboard. He exhaled, summoning as much courage as he could. “What are you thinking?” he asked.

Severus shrugged again, eyes pressed shut. Sirius waited; he knew Severus would eventually give him an answer. “What do you think?” Severus whispered, turning away from Sirius. Sirius sighed and rested a hand on Severus’s shoulder. He rubbed circles with his thumb, and Severus didn’t pull away. A good sign.

The room fell silent as Sirius continued to wait. Severus would take time to get to the truth of the matter, and luckily, Sirius had nowhere he could go.

“Do you not think we should end this?” Severus asked quietly.

“No. Not at all,” Sirius replied, worry churning his stomach. “Do you?” he forced himself to ask.

Severus hesitated before replying. “I’m not sure,” he admitted.

“Because you don’t think you deserve this,” Sirius explained, and Severus’s silence agreed. “I don’t agree with you.”

“I’m not a good person,” Severus said as if that explained everything. Sirius snorted.

“Neither am I. You don’t know half the shit I had to do in Azkaban to survive.”

“You never killed a child,” Severus countered, his voice breaking. The pain in his voice froze Sirius, and he wanted to skin Voldemort.

“No. I haven’t.” He couldn’t argue against that, but like hell was he going to lose Severus. Especially when it seemed like Severus didn’t have much of a choice. “But you also saved the

child from a far worse fate."

"Doesn't matter," Severus mumbled, curling in on himself slightly.

"Of course it does. What else were you going to do? Let Voldemort have his way?"

"I—I could have thought of something else," Severus tried to counter but his voice wavered.

"Maybe. But really, there wasn't anything else, was there?"

"I could have taken him and run."

"And blown your cover? I know how much that matters. It's the only way we'll stand a chance in this war, isn't it?"

Severus drew in a shaky breath. "I just…I've hurt so many people, and you can't love someone like that. Like me."

"Of course you can," Sirius said, "I'm doing it. And you're doing it with me too."

At that, Severus became very quiet. No one spoke for several minutes, and Sirius continued to trace circles into the skin of Severus's shoulder. He took the moment to think, and when he sorted through his thoughts, he broke the tense silence.

"Severus, I know you've done terrible things," Sirius began, taking a deep breath, "I'm not delusional. And you're right, I could never love someone who would willingly choose something like that. But you just—it's not like that for you. I can see it. You don't want to hurt others, you are really truly a kind person, but you made one decision when you were seventeen, among everything else that was happening to you, and you're suffering those consequences and it breaks my heart for you, Sev. I wish I could take that mark from your skin. I wish I could kill that monster and break his hold on you.

"And Sev, the other thing, let me finish, you could have given into that darkness. Hell, it would have made things a lot easier, wouldn't it? But you didn't. You still haven't, despite everything. Instead, you've done all you can to make up for that choice. You also saved a life that night, Sev. You gave seven children a father. I just—you're more than what you think you are.

"So don't let me lose you over this. Mourn the child, and do everything you can to destroy Voldemort for it. But don't let him take this from you too," Sirius finished winded. He swallowed hard.

Severus drew in a shuddering breath and stayed turned away from Sirius. "Is that how you see it?" he asked weakly.

"Yeah, it is."

"I'm not sure how much longer this can last," Severus said, desperation tinging his voice.

"We'll make it work for as long as we can," he reaffirmed, tightening his grip on Severus's shoulder.

"No, I mean the war. *This."* Severus stressed. Sirius thought and stroked his hair.

"I don't know Sev. But we'll keep on going as long as we can," Sirius said finally, sighing.

Honestly, until Voldemort was defeated, this nightmare would never end. And that could take years, for all he knew.

Severus responded by sitting up and pressing his forehead against Sirius's. His eyes were shut and mouth pulled down in a frown. His breathing started irregular but slowly steadied as they sat in silence. Sirius rested a hand on Severus's side and waited.

"It destroys me," Severus whispered, "Everything that happens. I'm not sure how I've managed to make it so long, and I don't think—don't think I want to live past this war. I can't—can't make peace with what has happened. If not for you…I want all of this to end, Sirius. But not you. Do you understand?"

Sirius drew in the scent and feel of Severus and leaned in to press a kiss against his lips. "Yeah, I understand, Sev. I understand." He moved in to kiss Severus again, but the man tilted his head away.

"The—the, what happened to me afterward. I don't remember much. Just getting there. But you know what happened. You can leave me for that, if you'd like," Severus continued feebly. He sounded painfully fragile and vulnerable.

"No, Sev. I don't want that. I'm just sorry I wasn't there to stop it." Sirius could feel Severus's breath against his cheek, and the intimacy threatened to overwhelm.

Severus leaned closer, and Sirius brought up a hand to cradle the back of Severus's head. "I'm sorry," he whispered, but Sirius shushed him. There was nothing to apologize for.

Sirius kissed him tenderly, an intimate pressing of lips and conveyance of warmth and love. Severus's shoulders trembled, and he pressed more into the kiss. Eventually, Sirius pulled away, pressing a string of kisses along the man's cheek, eyelids, and forehead. The room felt very still.

Sirius rested his cheek against Severus's, concern disrupting the tenderness. "Do you still feel sick?"

Severus stiffened immediately and attempted to pull away, but Sirius tugged him gently back. "Shh, it's not like that," he eased, "I just want to make sure you're okay. You said you were sick, and we haven't done anything to take care of it."

Severus gripped onto Sirius's arm, "I took my potions while you were sleeping. So I should be okay," he said quietly.

"And your legs? You said—."

"Yes. I healed them," Severus said curtly, his defenses rising again. Sirius waited a moment, letting the physical intimacy reduce some of Severus's barbs.

"Severus," he began again, swallowing hard. "I went with Albus and Molly and Remus to find you. They know. I'm sorry, Sev."

Severus's nails cut into Sirius's arm, and he cast his face downward, eyebrows furrowing. "I figured," he muttered bitterly. He cursed hard, the lines on his face hardening. His breathed harshly and let out another curse.

"They--," Sirius began, desperate to say something, but a quick shake of Severus's head cut him off.

"I never wanted them to know. *Anyone* to know," Severus said bitterly, pulling away from Sirius. He sat on the edge of the bed and buried his face into his hands, tilting forward. "What did they say?" he asked meekly, the question almost unbidden.

"Molly was heartbroken, but she loves you. Did everything she could to help you, and you…"

"What?" Severus cut in harshly.

"You said she reminded you of your mother. You were pretty torn up about it," Sirius finished, running his hands over his legs. Severus was quiet, so he continued. "Remus was shocked. Like me, you know, where it's too terrible to think about. Albus was broken up over it too. I can tell he really cares for you, and well, it wasn't easy for any of us to see you like that."

"Like what? Like a prostitute?" Severus responded angrily, self-hatred marring his voice. "A whore?"

"No, no, no, that's not what I meant," Sirius remedied. "Like…suffering. We should have been there to help you, and we weren't. And you were…you just desperately needed someone to be there for you. And *I* should have been."

Severus fell quiet, and Sirius stared at his back. He could see the knobs Severus's spine through the thin undershirt.

"I didn't want this to happen," Severus whispered. "I didn't want anyone to know." He paused, and his shoulders tensed. "Sometimes I feel that something, some goddamned greater force, wants me to suffer so that every bad thing that could possibly happen to me does. After everything, it's so hard to see the end of it," his voice broke, and he bent over. "I'm so frightened of losing you, Sirius. I can't live through this without you. Not anymore."

At that, Sirius closed the distance between them and wrapped his arms around Severus's waist, resting his head on the man's shoulder blade.

"I know, I know, my love. I can't do this without you either. And I promise to never leave you, Severus. If I have any say in it, I will never leave you. I love you, Severus."

Severus shook against him, and Sirius continued to hold him. They were silent for a long while until Severus gently shook Sirius off and sat up. He looked with tired eyes at the other man and pressed his forehead back against his. His eyes fell shut, and after a few moments, Sirius leaned forward to tenderly kiss Severus. This time Severus didn't turn away, and they softly kissed each other in the effervescent dawn light.

The day came, but at that point, Sirius and Severus were tightly pressed against each other, gentle hands running across the other, and tender kisses placed on soft skin. It was almost possible to imagine that the world ended past the confines of the room, that all they had and could ever possibly need was each other, and that nothing could ever threaten to take that away from them.

Christmas

Chapter Notes

A bit of a brighter chapter (it's Christmas!) and the Weasley twins!

“Merry Christmas,” Sirius said, kissing a half-awake Severus. Severus grumbled and turned away. Sirius huffed out a laugh and rose to get ready.

Despite the horrid family Christmas gatherings he was forced to attend, he had always loved Christmas. It had been magical at Hogwarts, and he found it a time to let the fears of the future melt away and be grateful for what one had—which in his case was his semi-freedom Severus and Harry and Remus and Buckbeak and the rest of the Order. It was hard not to let some optimism and holiday spirit filter through to him, and he looked eagerly forward to the day.

Severus did not appear to feel in kind. When Sirius got out of the shower, Severus was still sitting in bed, the lines on his face already hardening. He glanced over at Sirius, but looked away quickly, standing up for his own shower.

The last few days had been incredibly difficult for the two of them. Severus swung between painfully vulnerable and open to aloof and cold. A happy middle ground had yet to be established, and Sirius struggled to juggle the two very opposing versions of the man.

He understood, of course, why. Severus wanted and needed to feel loved, but he still struggled with the events of the past week and felt undeserving. He had drawn into himself, and even though, Sirius knew it was selfish, he missed the Severus from before the horrific nightmare. He prayed that man would find his way through the darkness and come back to him; he would wait as long as he had to.

Severus had also ignored Molly’s and Albus’ attempts to reach out to him, and Sirius had to reassure them that everything was okay and that Severus just needed time. Molly, especially, seemed sick with concern, but Severus became unresponsive whenever Sirius breached the topic.

Given everything, it certainly put a damper on the otherwise festive spirit, and Sirius hoped he could manage to impart the joyful, festive mood onto Severus. It was their first Christmas together, and Sirius wanted it to matter.

“Merry Christmas,” Severus grumbled as he stepped out of the bathroom. His hair, still damp, dripped onto his shirt. Sirius grinned.

“Thanks. It’s my favorite holiday.”

Severus arched an eyebrow, but his eyes remained distant. He took a few moments longer to respond than he should have. “Wouldn’t have guessed. Thought you hated your family.”

Sirius shrugged. “Yeah, but it’s more than that. It’s the holiday spirit, the feeling of thankfulness and cheer, and new beginnings.”

Severus offered a weak smile and eyed the bed. Sirius followed his gaze and shook his head.

"You're not spending Christmas in bed. We're having dinner tonight, and you should come."

Severus closed his eyes, lips pulled into a small frown. "Don't think that's a good idea," he muttered.

"Why not?" Sirius asked defiantly. He knew the answer, but he wasn't about to accept it.

"Clearly you know why," Severus responded in irritation. "I don't want to see them."

"They want to see you," Sirius countered. "I know you don't want to do it, Sev. But this is my Christmas with you, and it's important to me, and I think it could be really nice if we could do this."

Severus began to object, but Sirius interrupted him. "If it gets too much you can always leave. But please, for me?" He put on the best puppy eyes he could muster.

Severus was quiet, again taking too long to respond. "Fine, Black. Have your holiday," he said tiredly. Sirius grinned, but Severus was already climbing back into the bed, pulling the blankets up to his chin. Sirius watched concerned from his chair. "I'll get out for dinner," Severus explained, voice muffled. "Go downstairs. You should be with them."

Sirius wanted to fight him but decided that dinner was enough of a victory. It was the best he could do given the circumstances, and it hurt deeply to see Severus wasted like this. Rage burned behind his eye, and he wished he had taken longer to hurt Mark. Self-hatred seared through him as he once again considered his failure.

You're going to lose him over this.

Shut up. Now.

He wanted to leave you.

He loves me.

So?

It's Christmas. Leave me the fuck alone.

Very well. But you know I'm right.

"Okay Severus, I'll see you then," Sirius managed when the dark voice fell silent. He wished he didn't have to feel so helpless, but he didn't know what to do. He couldn't shake the feeling that Severus was slipping away from him.

Severus didn't respond, and Sirius closed the door with a heavy heart. He could only hope that dinner tonight would be reminiscent of the Christmases he used to spend with James and that despite everything, Severus would have something to look fondly back on.

Severus spent the whole day dreading dinner. He couldn't bear to see Molly again or hear the Weasley's gratitude or to look at Potter. He couldn't feign the happiness the festivities required, and he didn't want to hurt Sirius over it. He couldn't stand to see things worsen.

At least the dread supplanted the storm of self-hatred and disgust and horror that had

consumed him these past few days. It provided another point of focus, a welcome distraction.

As 6:00 rolled around, he almost decided to forego his promise. He could leave, disappear and spend Christmas at Spinner's End or his quarters in Hogwarts. There would be no one to face, and he could spend the night wrapped in misery. Probably as he deserved.

But he had promised Sirius. And Sirius was the last good thing going for him, and he couldn't risk losing him. Which meant that the dinner would have to happen, whether Severus liked it or not.

He pulled himself from the bed, took another shower, and got ready. He had no desire to appear early, so he scribbled a quick note for Sirius to reassure him of the promise and apparated to the small park outside of Grimmauld. He sat there for a while, his breath making clouds in the air. It was cold, but the kind that quickened your heart and made one feel alive. It cleared his head, and he readied himself for what was to come.

When he felt enough time had passed, he stood and walked back to Grimmauld. He opened the door and was immediately greeted with the sound of laughter and the smells of roast duck. His mouth watered, much to his surprise. He had lost all appetite these past few days, and eating had made him nauseous.

He tried to clamp down on his nerves; social events such as this always inspired anxiety, and he hoped he could fade to the background, eat dinner quietly, and leave shortly after. Hopefully, no one would make it a point to talk to him.

He paused at the door, summoning his courage, and firmly setting his mask. He would have to rely on all his acting expertise; it wouldn't do to appear any different than how he had left. He certainly couldn't give the impression that the cracks had started to shatter him. No, he had to be the cold, controlled Potions Master he always was. It was a role he could slip easily enough into, and he felt some degree of comfort in the pretense.

He opened the door and was greeted with a flurry of activity. The Weasley's, including Arthur who looked battered but not sickly, the other children, Remus, Sirius, and Tonks were sitting around the table, talking loudly and laughing. Molly and Bill were in the kitchen, putting the finishing touches on dinner with frenzied excitement. A sizeable Christmas tree brightened one corner and Christmas ornaments and clever enchantments hovered in the air, causing an impression of Christmas havoc. After three days in bed, the level of activity nearly overwhelmed Severus, and he ran his hands over his shirt to straighten himself out.

As per usual, the room fell silent once people caught sight of him. Molly dropped her spoon and it clattered on the countertop. Sirius did his best to hide a smile.

Severus felt as if beetles were biting at his throat, but he needed to say something. He couldn't stand here mutely. Luckily, Sirius beat him to it.

"Come in, we've got a seat right here," Sirius said, his cheeks red and eyes bright. He was well into tipsy, both a good and bad thing for Severus. "The more the merrier, right? And Molly's made quite the feast."

Severus nodded, quickly taking the seat. It was next to Tonks and another open seat, possibly Molly's or Bill's. Sirius sat another two seats down at the head of the table, and his smile threatened to knock Severus out of his chair.

Remus, sitting between Sirius and Tonks, poured Severus a glass of wine, and a small smile

and crinkling of the eyes conveyed enough of a sense that things were okay that it loosened something inside him.

He quickly scanned around the table, glancing at the children who stared at him with wide eyes and at Arthur who sat amidst crutches and with a look of gratitude that Severus couldn't bear to see. He instead looked at Arthur's neck and forearms to see if he could discern any scarring. He had tried his best, but it had been a long night and his hands were not as steady as they should have been. He could offer the spell he used to hide his, but that was far too personal and would open too many questions, and well, frankly, it wasn't worth it.

"I apologize if there's a lot of scarring," Severus said since everyone else remained silent. "There are a few salves I can make that might help. Or even if you have residual pain." A part of him shrieked to shut up: he wasn't supposed to offer any more help. However, the offer came easily, and anyway, it wasn't as if the Dark Lord would find out about a few minor salves. And if he did, well it didn't really matter anymore. The worst had already been done.

Arthur looked at him, his mouth slightly agape. "Don't be ridiculous, Severus. You saved my life. I haven't been able to thank you, but sincerely, thank you, Severus. From me and my children and my wife, we'll be forever grateful for you."

Henry's face flashed before Severus, and he bit his tongue to try to repress the memory. He looked down at his plate and started locking any doors that opened to emotions. "You're welcome," he said, painfully unaware of what to say. "Please go back to what you were talking about, I didn't want to disturb."

"Don't be silly, dear. You're not disturbing," Molly said as she levitated the food from the kitchen counter to the table. The feast was considerable – roast duck and all the other usual staples of Christmas dinner. It smelled heavenly, and Severus heard his stomach rumble. Bill followed, wiping some soot from his forehead. He looked beat, but his eyes were content, and he swung himself into the chair next to Fred.

Molly seized up the dinner, smiled and nodded, and then sat down next to Severus. As she did, she pressed a kiss against his cheek. "We'll talk later, okay, dear?" she said so only Severus could hear, and he gave a small nod. Despite the shame and fear, there was no use trying to hide from Molly. She would get her way one way or another, no matter how much Severus dreaded the conversation.

"Molly, incredible," Tonks said, staring in awe at the food. Molly smiled.

"Merry Christmas. Here's to family and friends and a bright new year," she toasted, and everyone raised their glasses in agreement. Severus met Sirius's eyes briefly, and the shared look seemed to reaffirm the toast. He felt the smallest measure of hope fill him, a hope that the nightmare would pass

Hope often led to a broken heart, but maybe this time would be different.

Everyone helped themselves to generous portions, including Severus, and the room broke into light conversation and laughter. Tonks talked for a while with Severus, expressing interest and appreciation in his modifications to the wolfsbane potion. They discussed the results and possible improvements, and the scientific discussion was a welcome relief from all of the emotionally charged confessions. With this, Severus could easily pretend he was his old self, and again, he was glad he had helped. Maybe it was selfish after what had happened, but he couldn't seem to shake the feeling.

Tonks eventually drifted back into conversation with Remus and Sirius, and Molly took advantage of the opening.

"How are you feeling, dear?" she asked, voice dropping so that it wouldn't be heard over the sound of the other conversations. Severus shrugged and took a bite of the potatoes. Molly sighed. "I know you don't want to talk to me about it. I understand, that's okay. But I…I love you like one of my children, and I want to help you however I can."

Severus froze at her words. He didn't deserve that either, and he felt guilty over that sudden burst of happiness and utter relief of not feeling motherless. His throat closed up, and he battled over the feeling of love and that awful guilt that someone like him didn't deserve even the minimum of what Molly could offer.

"Severus?" Molly asked gently, and Severus broke from his thoughts.

"I…thank you. That means…I'll try to talk to you, but it's hard…I can barely with Sirius."

"That's all I'm asking for. Now take some Christmas pudding. You've gotten too skinny, and I won't have that," Molly said kindly, his eyes shining with warmth. It seemed to melt the block of black tar that made every breath a challenge, and he suddenly felt much lighter.

Severus's lips twitched upwards and he obliged. "It's all delicious, Molly," he said, clearly redirecting the conversation, and they fell into a comfortable chat over cooking techniques and the merits of duck over turkey and the best way to prepare potatoes. Severus lacked the experience and knowledge of Molly, but given his driven focus on cooking, he could hold his own. Like Tonks, the rhythms of a normal conversation about an interesting topic soothed him, and the wine started to make him feel a little light-headed.

All in all, it was pleasant, and Severus begrudgingly had to admit he was glad he had come. It felt like a breath of fresh air after a week of breathing nothing but stale, dirty fumes.

As dessert wrapped up, everyone started to move to the living room. Severus, starting to feel exhausted by the social interaction, took it as his time to leave. He could slip out easily enough and was about to when a firm hand on his elbow stopped him.

He turned to look at Molly, who shook her head. "Not yet, darling. We've still got presents."

"Molly, I--."

"You can leave afterward, okay? But just stay for this," Molly said, and Severus couldn't summon any fight. He nodded and let Molly lead him to the living room. They were the last to arrive, and Severus immediately gravitated towards his usual chair in the back corner. He could fade easily enough during Order meetings, and he only wanted to observe.

Molly, fortunately, let him and took a seat next to Arthur. Sirius, of course, was in the center, head thrown back in laughter and a hand clenched around another glass of wine. Remus and Potter laughed with him, and Granger rolled her eyes.

Severus clamped down on feelings of jealously and loneliness. He clearly did not belong, would never truly belong, and it was hard to make his peace with it when he so deeply loved the man at the center of it. It was futile to wish for a different past, but he hoped in another life he had chosen the light instead and hadn't suffered as he had. At the very least, to feel the freedom of being able to laugh freely, to never worry about repercussions, and to feel like he belonged. It was

foolish, and he cut the line of thought.

The room turned into one big exchange of jokes and stories and light-hearted barbs, and Severus watched quietly from the corner. This idea of this Christmas contrasted so greatly with his childhood, it was almost laughable if not completely heartbreaking.

He met Sirius's gaze a few times, and Sirius always smiled brightly, his eyes shining when it happened. He gestured to come over, but Severus shook his head. They were only, if anything, forced friends, and they didn't need to cue anyone more into their relationship. Sirius seemed to understand, leaving Severus alone, but not before shooting a quick wink. Out of habit, Severus rolled his eyes.

"Time for presents, everyone," Molly declared, gesturing towards yet another Christmas tree. The children all grabbed their respective gifts, unwrapping the traditional Weasley sweaters, Fred and George's new collection of pranks, and other small assorted gifts. Potter hugged Sirius at one point, and Severus had to avert his eyes.

He watched the gift-opening distantly; Sirius may have gotten him something, but he doubted anyone else. Albus and Minerva generally gifted him small things – a potions book or new socks that Albus was so ridiculously fond of. He had planned to do his own Christmas shopping this past week, but needless to say, he hadn't found the time. A pang of regret hit him; Sirius deserved a gift, especially given his fondness for Christmas.

As the flurry of the gift-wrapping faded, one gift remained under the Christmas tree. Molly said something to Ginny who stood and grabbed it. She walked over to Severus and extended her arm.

"Merry Christmas. This is from all of us," she said, "Thank you, again. You—," she cut off, biting her lip. Severus stared stunned for a moment, before reaching out and taking it. Everyone was looking at him now, and the panic bells were ringing at the attention.

"I don't know what to say," he said, his eyebrow arching in surprise. He could count the number of people who had ever given him gifts on two hands, and he certainly hadn't expected this. "Thank you."

Ginny smiled and then sat next to her mom. People were still watching him, so with quick, methodical movements, he unwrapped the present.

He pulled out a soft, forest green sweater with a giant *S* embroidered on the front. His hands trembled as he held it, and he thanked them again, trying to hide just how touched he was.

"There are two more things," Molly said, and Severus turned back to the wrapping. He pulled out a picture frame, and he fell speechless when he saw the picture.

"Molly," he said, trying to convey how much this meant to him. Molly smiled.

"It's from years ago. Arthur found it when he was going through old photos, and we thought you would like it," she explained.

Severus nodded, swallowing hard. "Yes, very much," he said, fingers tracing over the photo. It showed a much younger version of himself and a much younger version of Molly in the kitchen, vegetables spread before them. The photo had caught Molly in the process of laughing, and a meager, but significant smile on Severus. At the end of it, Molly reached out to grab Severus's shoulder, and the smile broke into a grin. He had so few photos of himself, and even

fewer where he actually looked happy. It moved him more than he would like to admit.

He turned back to the present and looked at the final gift – a card with potions bubbling on the front. He opened it and skimmed it over quickly. The seven different handwritings and repetitive heartfelt words conveyed their gratitude, and Severus felt his throat close up in appreciation. He couldn't read this now, so he closed it and set it aside. He thanked them again, and Molly smiled.

"Merry Christmas," she said, and the children repeated the sentiment. When Severus didn't respond, the room fell back into its casual conversation, and the children took great enjoyment from using Fred and George's gifts. Molly huffed out in annoyance, and Arthur chuckled.

With everyone distracted, Severus ran his hands over the sweater. This and the picture and the card was an act of love from Molly and of gratitude from everyone else. He felt incredibly moved, his chest tightening. It was a welcome change after this week of hell.

He glanced up when the twins approached him, and he furrowed his brows in confusion. Surely, there was nothing more.

"Professor," George said, face serious. It was a shocking change from his usual countenance, and Severus felt the first hint of panic. Had something gone wrong?

"Yes, George?" he asked, tilting his head.

"We wanted to thank you, of course. Even though you're probably sick to death of hearing that."

"And we wanted to get you this," Fred continued, pulling out another gift from behind him. "Not because of our Dad or anything, even though you could throw that in if you want."

"But because of all your help with the potions and other super boring stuff," George joked, a smile setting Severus at ease.

"Yeah, we were placing bets on what extremities we were going to lose."

"I lost five sickles because Fred didn't get his nose blown off. Prat."

"Oy, Mum would have strung you up. You want that instead?" Fred responded, lightly shoving George. George huffed out a laugh. "So anyway, here is our gift of appreciation. For not letting me lose my nose and for Mum not slaughtering George?"

"I…thank you," Severus replied, accepting the gift. "I'm happy I could help," he said, "And you have no excuse not to let me see them. I don't need Umbridge enforcing martial law because you blew off some poor Hufflepuff's head."

"Umbitch?" George said quickly, and Fred shoved him again, shooting him a look. "What? You know I'm not wrong," he protested.

Severus couldn't keep the small smile from his face. It was his first smile in over a week, and his muscles struggled to follow the familiar path. "Umbitch. I like that. I've taken to calling her the pink pimple, but yours seems to work just as well."

George laughed loudly, and Fred rolled his eyes, looking as if he was trying to bottle all his anger about the woman inside.

“Complete nightmare, isn’t she?” George asked.

“Quite,” Severus sighed. “Should be gone by the end of the year, fortunately. But until then…”

Fred and George nodded in sympathy. “Could you just poison her?” George asked. “You are the Potions Master.”

“Don’t think poisons will work on someone like her. Already too poisonous to begin with. But I could always try,” he said when George and Fred’s expressions fell. The conversation was teetering out so Severus decided to end it. It also seemed about time for him to slip upstairs. “Thank you, Fred and George. It means quite a lot to me. Now go join your family again. No need to talk to someone like me.” Fred and George began to protest, but Severus silenced with a shake of his head. “Anyway, I might head home. But Merry Christmas.”

Fred and George said their goodbyes, and then returned to the middle of the room to prevent Ron from blowing up his BuzzCracker. They really didn’t need to end Christmas in a swarm of bees.

Severus stood up, looked around the room one last time, and slipped upstairs. There was no one out, so he headed directly to Sirius’s room, sitting heavily in his chair.

He gripped the presents in his hands. He cast the photo frame to rest on his nightstand, left the card beside him, and took off his shirt to replace it with Molly’s sweater. The heavy wool felt wonderful against his skin and seemed to impart a warmth deeper than just the sweater.

He also opened Fred and George’s gift. This time, he went slowly and hoped that his students hadn’t gifted him anything too generous. They needed all the money they had for their Wizard Wheezes. Not to buy gifts to their bitter professor.

He revealed a small rectangular box and opened it to reveal a beautiful quill. It was a glossy black, the tip sharp, and it had the hum of enchantments that must have cost quite a bit. A note fell out, and he smiled at the words.

To stop us from blowing ourselves up. Fred and George.

P.S. Super thankful for all your corrections.

P.S.S. We made enough money off the Fainting Fancies, so we don’t want it back. So just take it.

He pulled out the quill and trilled it between his hands. It was beautiful, and warmth spread through him again.

Bathing in that glow of happiness, he waited for Sirius to rejoin him. He felt much more human than the start of today, and he sent out a prayer of understanding to Henry. The guilt still haunted him, and he would never forget the lessons he learned, but he had to indulge in his selfishness if he wanted to survive this war. He had to at the very least pretend he deserved the few good things he had and hope that Henry and Regulus and Lily and Mum would understand.

It was the only way he would remain sane. It was the only he could help win the war. And if the Light won the war, well, he hoped it would redeem him on some accounts. Or that everyone he had hurt for the greater good would understand.

It was the most he could hope for.

Here

Chapter Notes

Some warnings - the chapter is pretty smutty so read at your digression - no worries if smut isn't your thing, and if it is I would recommend my other story, Used to the Darkness, which features a good amount of action.

Other than that, enjoy!

Sirius stumbled up the stairs, head buzzing with alcohol. His cheeks had started to ache from all of the laughter, and he couldn't suppress a few wayward giggles as stray jokes filled his mind.

He was happy -- a statement he no longer took for granted. He was happy, and Christmas had been delightful, and Harry had liked his gift, and *Severus* had come and speaking of the man—

"Merry Christmas, you greasy snake," Sirius teased, closing the door behind him and quickly crossing the room to press a lengthy kiss on Severus. He fell backward off-balance and landed on his knees in front of Severus. He rested his head on the man's knee and peered up at him, smiling lopsidedly.

Severus rested a hand on the top of Sirius's head. "Merry Christmas, you mangy mutt."

"Did you have fun?" Sirius asked lightly, stretching some of the syllables. Severus huffed and scratched his fingers on Sirius's scalp.

"Yes, I did. It was very nice."

Sirius pressed a kiss against the man's knee. "Good. Thank you for coming," he dropped his voice to a whisper for the last sentence. Severus sighed.

"And I assume you had a good time also?" Severus asked, tilting his head.

"One of the best," Sirius laughed. "Didn't think about Azkaban the entire time. It was good, Sev." He pressed another kiss on his fabric of Severus's pants. A thought struck him, and he jolted backward. "Got you a gift," he said, eyes widening. "Fuck, where did I put it?" He stood, grabbing the table for balance, and stumbled backward. He went to his nightstand, opened the drawer, and began rummaging through it.

Severus watched in amusement and tried not to dwell on the fact that he had nothing to give Sirius. Sirius would understand, but it didn't make him feel less bad.

"Found it," Sirius called out victoriously. He steadied himself and took measured steps back to Severus. He sunk into his chair and held out the gift. "For you, my love."

Severus took the gift from him. It was a long, square box and thin. The wrapping paper was adorned with snowflakes. He began to unwrap it, but a hand from Sirius stopped him.

“Fuck, I messed this up. You’re supposed to open it after I —damn.” He thought for a moment and glanced down at his hands. “Well, that’s not happening. Okay, fine, just open it.”

“Sirius…,” Severus began, holding the gift carefully. Sirius shook his head.

“Just open it. You’ll understand what I mean.”

Severus looked at him for a few seconds longer before obliging. A few movements of his hand and he pulled out a record. Severus’s furrowed his brow and glanced towards the corner where Sirius kept his record player.

Sirius rubbed his hands on his pants, fingers tapping quickly. He shifted and stood up suddenly. “Here, I’ll put it on,” he said quickly, almost breathlessly. Severus handed him the record, and he practically ran to the record player. He put it on, stepping back and twisting his hands. He kept his eyes downcast, sporadically glancing up at Severus nervously.

The room was silent for a moment before the sounds of a piano began to fill the room. The notes were hesitant initially but began to pick up, the pianist striking note after note to create a song that held hints of pain and somberness but led to hope and love. They listened in silence, the song fading after about five minutes. It was a beautiful song and one Severus had never heard before.

He stared at Sirius and waited for an explanation.

“It’s, I,” Sirius stumbled, fingers tapping frantically against his leg. “I, um, I composed that…for you. For everything.” He fell silent, his stare burning a hole in the rug.

Severus sat speechless, the wave of emotion overwhelming him. It was a profound gesture, and he covered his hand with his mouth, bending forward slightly. He closed his eyes, amazed that he still had any tears left in him.

“Oh shit, shit, Sev, I didn’t mean—,” Sirius said desperately. He rushed over to Severus and crouched. He looked ready to retract the song, and Severus rested a hand against his cheek to silence him.

“It’s beautiful, Sirius. Beautiful,” he choked out, “You- thank you. Thank you. For everything.” Sirius wiped away the few tears that had managed to escape, and Severus uncovered his mouth to grab the other side of Sirius’s face and pull him into a kiss. They kissed slowly, falling into the familiar habit.

“I love you, Severus,” Sirius whispered between kisses.

“Sirius,” Severus managed, kissing him again and again until he could feel the light of a new day break across his face. He had survived, even though it had nearly killed him, and now, he had Sirius, who deserved or not, shone like his namesake and drove the worst of the night away.

When Sirius finally felt sober enough, he gently pushed against Severus’s shoulder. Severus, who had sprawled across the bed, face mushed into a pillow, skin bare and silky with sweat, huffed out in irritation.

“Come on, idiot. I want to play you that song.”

Severus jerked his arm against him and didn’t lift his head. Sirius leaned over and pressed a line of kisses down his back, licking at the saltiness. Severus sighed.

“If this is your idea of convincing me to get out of bed, you’re doing terribly,” Severus grumbled, still sounding breathless.

“Come on, love,” Sirius tried again. “You come with me and then I’ll fuck your brains out, hmm?”

Severus let out a shaky sound, which Sirius categorized as a laugh. “When you put it like that…” Severus said, his voice dropping a tone deeper. Severus tensed and pushed himself up. His eyes were still a little hazy, his cheeks tinged red, and his lips looked thoroughly kissed. His hair lay lank against his face. To Sirius, there was nothing hotter than a disheveled Severus.

Sirius almost completely dismissed the idea of going downstairs to play the song. Why would he ever want to leave this bed when he could have Severus moaning his name in minutes? But the song mattered to him, and he would be damned if he didn’t play it as he had intended.

“Let’s be quick, Sirius,” Severus ordered, and Sirius nodded in full-hearted agreement. A minute or two to get downstairs, five to play the song, and well, Sirius wasn’t one to break promises.

He grabbed boxers and an old t-shirt from the floor and threw it on, and Severus did the same with his button-up and briefs. He left the shirt unbuttoned, and Sirius had to close his eyes when he caught sight. “Don’t do this to me,” he said.

“Do what?” Severus asked through the darkness, a wryness in his voice.

“I’m not playing with a hard-on,” Sirius grumbled, and he could sense the smirk.

“I’m not doing anything,” Severus said, his voice dripping with innocence. Sirius scoffed.

“Sure you aren’t,” he said sarcastically. “You never are.” He startled when he felt Severus’s hand around his forearm. He hadn’t heard him move, and he licked his lips.

“Keep this up,” Severus growled, in that low, low voice of his, “And I might be the one fucking your brains out.”

Sirius exhaled heavily and grudgingly opened his eyes. Severus filled his vision, his eyes dark and piercing as if they were seeing straight into him. Which they almost certainly were. “How about both?” he said, the wires in his brain short-circuiting.

A wicked grin spread across Severus’s face. “Both,” he repeated. He leaned forward and pressed a languorous kiss on Sirius, his mouth open and hot. Sirius made a sound in the back of his throat and as he was about to pull Severus backward so that they would tumble into bed, Severus pulled away. “But first play me the song.”

Sirius nodded and wondered if he had time to take a cold shower. Every time Severus touched him, he felt like he was burning, and even just standing close made him feel dizzy and overheated. His gut ached with it.

Sirius brought a finger up to his lips and arched his eyebrows. Severus rolled his eyes and strode out the door. Sirius followed close behind, his eyes scanning down the dark hallway. Everyone should be asleep, and as long as they didn’t make any noise, they should be fine.

Severus pulled him down the staircase, holding tightly to his hand. They quickly entered the piano room, and Sirius turned around to close and lock the door. “Cast a silencing spell for me, dear?”

Severus stared at him, his brow crinkling just so. Sirius had to look away quickly. Seeing Severus sweaty, disheveled, and looking incredibly, unbelievably hot was not going to help with his concentration. “You need to get a wand, Sirius,” Severus said quietly, and Sirius shrugged, trying to keep his face slack.

He felt like an idiot without a wand, but the stolen one had been more trouble than it was worth. It wasn’t like he could stroll into Ollivander’s. But god, he missed magic – the few wandless spells he could perform were far from enough – and he despised how Azkaban had taken yet another thing from him. It set his teeth on edge and caused that black voice to chatter away, so he tried not to think about it.

Unless, of course, the greasy git brought it up.

“Can’t. You know I can’t. Not like they have clearance sales for convicts,” Sirius explained, trying to remain as apathetic as possible. He knew Severus could see right through it, but damn, all he wanted to do now was play his love confession and then spend the next few hours making deep, passionate, insane love because Severus finally seemed okay again, and he had missed him, and he wasn’t sure he could ever go through something like that again.

Severus remained quiet, and if Sirius wasn’t so used to his stares by now, he would have felt too uncomfortable to continue.

“Cast that spell, Sev. The longer we’re down here, the longer it is until I’m sucking your cock.”

Severus arched an eyebrow, and Sirius could see his chest moving with shallow breaths. Sirius loved that chest. Loved every part of him really, but loved that chest because it was bony and pale and so alive.

Damn, if he had known that an unbuttoned shirt would have gotten him as aroused as it did, he would have ripped out all the buttons months ago.

“*Muffilato*,” Severus muttered, waving his wand, and Sirius smiled. He walked to the piano and slid onto the bench, lifting up the piano cover. He rested his fingers on the keys and experimented with a few notes. Severus moved up behind him. He reached over him and tugged upwards at the hem of Sirius’s shirt. Sirius obliged, the shirt was discarded, and Sirius’s breath caught in his throat.

“I wanted to play this to you first. Before the record. But the Firewhiskey…” Sirius explained, and Severus wrapped his arms loosely around Sirius’s neck and leaned forward, pressing into his back.

“What record?” he whispered, breath ghosting across Sirius’s cheek. Sirius let out a shaky laugh, trying to disguise how affected he was. He didn’t do a very good job, and Severus pressed a kiss onto his neck.

Sirius decided he wasn’t going to last much longer, so he tried to steady himself and focus back on the piano. He closed his eyes, drawing in deeply the scent of Severus, and let his mind slip into that thin line of trust and concentration. His fingers began to draw music from the keys, and he fell into that familiar groove he had established after hours and hours of practice.

He lost track of time. He could only hear the music and his love for the infuriating man pressed behind him. He could only feel the warmth of Severus as he traced Sirius’s neck with his mouth, could only feel the weight of him as he pressed down on his shoulders, a stabilizing force

that calmed him greatly.

"Severus," he gasped out as the song reached its climax, and Severus tightened his grip, began to kiss his neck like he wanted to devour him, and with a desperation that made Sirius lightheaded.

The last note rang out into the night, and Sirius couldn't stand it anymore, he needed Severus in him and on him and *everywhere.*

"Up-upstairs," Sirius choked out, thoughts becoming lost under the sheer desperation of Severus. Severus growled, the vibrations sending shocks down his spine, and Sirius shivered.

Severus pulled away, and the sheer shock of absence made Sirius feel sick. He reached out again, found his side, and wrapped his arm around his back. His skin was alive, every touch sending shockwaves through his system and he was drunk on this, on him.

Severus, somehow still somewhat functioning, dragged Sirius upstairs in a hurried flurry of limbs stumbling on stairs. Then they were in their room and in the bed, and Severus was on top of him, skin pressed everywhere.

"Severus," he said, trying to convey his need, and he latched onto the crook of the man's neck, nipping and sucking. Severus shuddered, and then he was devouring him, mouth hungry and needy as he traced Sirius's face, as he worked his way down Sirius's chest, and lower and lower and *oh.*

Sirius lifted his hips, so Severus could pull down his boxers, and in one smooth motion, Severus had enclosed his mouth around Sirius's cock, and he moaned, throwing his head back and grasping at the headboard.

"Fuck," he breathed, air catching in his throat as Severus took him in deeper, began to hum, began to fucking *swallow.* "God, god, need you, need you," Sirius panted. He buried his hand in Severus's hair, grasping at it and pulling the strands just enough to send sharp pleasure through him, and then Severus moaned himself, and the sound reverberated around Sirius's cock, and *fuck* this was it, he was going to come and he would have been embarrassed at how short he had lasted, but it was Severus. And Severus had such hold over him it was almost ridiculous.

He managed to warn Severus, and then he was over the edge. He pulled too hard on Severus's hair, but he couldn't think, couldn't breathe – and when he came to himself, he found that he was mumbling "yours, yours" almost hysterically, and Severus had slid back up and was whispering "mine, mine" back, and that really did it for Sirius.

"You fucking bastard," he managed when he found he could think again, and Severus blinked at him. "You have no right to do what you've done to me."

Severus's face remained blank for a moment before he seemed to remember something and smirked. "Neither do you," he said, his voice deep and seductive, and Sirius blinked stupidly at him. Severus met his gaze and then glanced downwards. Sirius muttered a curse and apology and was going to roll over so he could get on top of Severus and slide between his legs when a thought struck him.

More so a need he had been trying not to think of rather than a thought, but it emerged full force all the same, and for whatever reason. Maybe it was because of the week of worry, the panic, the near loss, but he *needed* Severus inside him. He needed to feel the man for all he was, to be

claimed, consumed, and despite that sharp spike of fear, he knew it had to happen.

"You, I want…" Sirius began, struggling to put it into words. Severus tilted his head. "I want you inside me," he said, the words pressing a weight on his chest. Severus shook his head.

"You don't need to do that. Not if you don't want it," Severus consoled, and Sirius shook his head aggressively.

"No, I *need* you. I need you in me. God, I'll die if you don't." The words shocked Sirius because as far as he could tell, they were the truth.

"Sirius…," Severus began.

"Just be fucking careful, okay?"

"Sirius, are you sure?" Severus asked again, and Sirius looked at him in irritation.

"Despite all the homophobia my father loved to spout, despite the idea that this is the most emasculating thing I could do and I somehow internalized that shit, *yes* I want you to take me like your bitch," Sirius said, the words flying out of his mouth. Severus regarded him and pursed his lips.

"Your father was a prick," he finally said, and Sirius huffed out a relieved laugh.

"Yeah, he was. Now get your cock inside me," he said, clamping down on his nerves. Instead, he focused on the spots of color on Severus's pale skin. The bruises from Mark were gone – Sirius knew Severus used a spell to hide what remained of his injuries, but the redness still marred him, disrupting the smooth alabaster of his skin, and Sirius couldn't drag his eyes away.

A thought suddenly struck him – maybe Severus didn't want to do this? Maybe there was something Mark had done to him? Anxiety started to strangle him, he was presuming too much, expecting that Severus would want him like that. Maybe he liked how Sirius was manly? And this would ruin it and ruin the rest of it and then he would be alone again.

Alone.

"Sev, is that okay?" he asked, eyes desperately searching for Severus's.

"Is that okay?" Severus repeated, sounding baffled. "You idiot man, of course, it is. I'll take you however I can get you. But I want to make sure you're okay with this."

Sirius thought for a moment to reaffirm his decision and nodded. Severus leaned down to kiss him, and his hand wandered lower. It didn't take much for Sirius to be hard again, and he knew that Severus must be aching.

Sirius tugged at Severus's shirt, and that was quickly off, along with the briefs. Severus slid between Sirius's legs, and Sirius looked down. It was a bit disorienting to be in this position, but he found he didn't mind it. Well, actually, it was probably one of the hottest things he had ever seen, and his stomach curled in anticipation. He expected it to hurt, of course, it would, but the idea of Severus was too much, and he would rather lose his mind than not have this.

Severus summoned lube and squirted some onto his fingers. He grabbed Sirius's cock in one hand and started to stroke slowly. Sirius felt pleasure course up his spine, and he gazed through half-lidded eyes.

Severus leaned down and pressed a string of kisses, starting at Sirius's knee and moving slowly, infuriatingly slowly, upwards. His breath tickled Sirius's leg, and as he got closer, Sirius gripped the sheet harder. Severus bit gently into the skin, and Sirius almost involuntarily kicked his leg. His body screamed for Severus, his mind couldn't think of anything else. Goddammit, he shouldn't have suggested this – not because of his father or his fear, but because he wasn't going to survive what Severus would do to him.

Severus pulled away and trailed his finger upward, pausing at the entrance. He glanced up at Sirius, and whatever he must have seen only encouraged him as he slowly pushed one finger in.

Sirius jerked, tensing, but Severus continued to push in, and then after a moment to let Sirius grow comfortable, pushed another in. His fingers curled and brushed against something that sent a deep shock of pleasure through him. God, he was going to die here tonight, whether or not Severus fucked him.

Severus got another finger in and pushed until they were knuckle-deep. Sirius twisted at the discomfort, but with a few strokes of his cock, his mind had melted enough that suddenly the fingers weren't uncomfortable, but interesting. A sign of something to come, something to fill him up in a way he never thought possible.

Severus withdrew his fingers and positioned Sirius so that his legs wrapped around his back. He was grateful for that; it gave him some leverage, left him with some control. He couldn't stop the heady feeling of the idea of Severus fucking him while completely powerless, legs pushed too far up to be of any use, hands bound, completely at the man's mercy. Tomorrow night, he thought. That can be for tomorrow night.

He wasn't sure he would survive the week.

Severus squirted some more lube and then angled the head of his cock so it was pushing against Sirius. Sirius let out a needy whimper.

"Please," Sirius begged, shocking himself yet again. He wasn't a beggar, but something about tonight was impacting him deeply. "Please, fuck me, Sev, oh god, I *need* you."

Severus stared down at him, eyes wide and pupils blown. His cheeks were flushed and he looked unmoored, breathless. The desperate desire in his eyes, the sheer hunger, was enough to leave Sirius speechless.

"You beautiful man," Severus said shakily. "You beautiful, wonderful man." And with that, he pushed himself into Sirius, slowly and steadily. Sirius couldn't suppress the grunt of pain and spasm of his lower abdomen's muscles, and he tensed against him. Severus stopped and gently stroked his cock, letting some of the pleasure displace the pain. "Shh, relax, my love. Just relax. I've got you. I have you."

"Severus," Sirius grunted, and suddenly, maybe this wasn't such a good idea. God, he was going to fuck this up, wasn't he? Just like he did with everything else; it would be fitting.

"Sirius, puppy, you're doing so well. So good. Dear God, if only you could see yourself right now. How beautiful you are, how *good* you are."

The words washed over Sirius, and he wasn't sure how he had lived without this.

"Ok, ok, Sev," Sirius said, and Severus took the cue to continue to push in until he was all the way, and Sirius was so full with him, so overpowered that he wondered how he still had the

ability to think. He let out a strangled moan, and he had to avert his eyes from Severus's face because it was just too much seeing him like this.

Severus held still, stomach muscles clenched and ribs poking through. Sirius's hands burned with the desire to trace them, to feel the skin beneath him, and to know that Severus was *here.*

Sirius drew in a shaky breath and steadied himself. It was uncomfortable, and he doubted it would get any better just lying here, so he nodded for Severus to start moving. Severus took the cue and began to thrust – slowly at first, so slowly, and Sirius gaped at it, how even that felt like constellations breaking across his skin.

Severus moaned, hand falling forward to press against the sheet. In a desperate scramble, the hand found Sirius's and fingers entwined, held it down against the bed. Severus was also starting to do that thing where he looked at Sirius in complete, consuming awe and disbelief. He looked at him as if Sirius was the only person in the world, the only thing that could every possibly matter. It made Sirius want to cry.

The pace quickened and the strokes were long and hard, and after the first one found his prostrate, Sirius knew he was a goner. His moans devolved into breathless sobs and pleasure blanketed until every sense, emotion, thought were focused completely and utterly on the rhythm on the movement and the man taking him.

"Severus," Sirius gasped, unable to think of anything else. "Sev, sev, gonna, fuck, sev," he repeated like a mantra, and Severus shuddered against him, increasing the fervor in a way that made Sirius want to believe in God.

If God, in this case, was a far too skinny, sarcastic, thirty-year-old British man.

"Sirius, Sirius," Severus responded, eyes blown and mouth agape. With one hand, he reached out and stroked Sirius's cock, and that was all it took, and Sirius sobbed against the orgasm, against the feeling of heaven he had found, against how far away Azkaban felt.

Severus came shortly after, his back arching as he collapsed onto Sirius. He came silently, biting down and shuddering as the pleasure rolled through him. He let out one single cry, a cry that Sirius wanted to immortalize for it embodied everything he could have ever wanted.

Their hands remained entangled, and Sirius reveled in the weight of Severus. The man weighed far too little, but he weighed enough that he pressed down in a way that comforted him even more than sex – in a way that even though he had almost lost Severus again, he was here and he was alive and at the end of the day, that was all that mattered.

Severus eventually pulled out, and Sirius didn't know what to make of the lingering sticky feeling. He wanted to be disgusted, but it indicated that he had been taken, that he had been fucked by Severus Snape, and he couldn't really be disgusted by something like that.

Severus was about to roll off, but Sirius steadied his hands on his back. "Stay," he whispered. "Need to know you're here."

Severus didn't respond but stay pressed against Sirius, head resting on the angle of his shoulder and chest. His breathing slowed, but Sirius knew he was still awake because he could feel Severus's back muscles twitch as he ran his hands up and down.

"I missed you," he said, and Severus didn't respond. "I love you."

“I’m sorry,” Severus said, his voice seeming to shrink. He suddenly seemed stripped of the confidence he had carried throughout the past hours. He sounded tired, and Sirius’s heart ached.

“Shhh, no, it’s alright,” Sirius said softly, fingers tracing slow patterns along Severus’s spine.

“It hurts,” Severus admitted quietly, the vulnerability in his voice carving a hole in Sirius’s chest. He pressed a kiss on the top of Severus’s scalp.

“You’re safe, Sev. You’re here with me. Nothing can hurt you here.”

Severus breathed out heavily. “I missed you too, puppy,” he whispered, voice slow and halting.

“We’ll get through this together,” Sirius said, unsure of what exactly ‘this’ was referring to, but it seemed to carry everything it needed too.

“I love you,” Severus professed so quietly it might not have been said at all. Sirius heard it all the same, and tightened his grip on Severus, intent on never letting go.

Agony

Chapter Notes

Here begins the start of Part 3.

Part 3 will carry us until the end of this story and introduce the final plot device. I have written the epilogue and believe it offers the conclusion that befits this story.

I also included a heavy dose of Molly in this chapter and look forward to when I can upload my ones-shot about Severus and her (which, unfortunately, will be at the end of this story). I have also started a Regulus/Severus story which follows Severus and the second Black brother throughout Hogwarts and into their years as Death Eaters. It's titled Burning Doves, if you are interested.

With that, thank you for all the continued love for this story and I hope you enjoy as we start to come to the end.

(Also this story has hit 100k! Bring out the champagne!)

"You need to talk to them, Severus," Sirius said, trying to tamp down on his frustration. Yelling at Severus would not help.

"No," Severus replied icily.

"Sev, listen to me," Sirius pleaded, but Severus only turned away. "It's only going to make it worse."

"It can't get any worse," Severus responded, and he flinched away when Sirius tried to brush his hair.

Sirius stared at him, trying to think. He wanted to scream, but clamps pressed down on his chest. He didn't know what was worse – the need to scream or the inability to do so.

"Then it doesn't matter if you talk to them?" he tried. "If it can't get any worse?"

"Leave me alone, Sirius," he responded coldly. "You know how it has to be."

Sirius fell silent. He understood, of course, which made it all the harder to argue with Severus.

"Molly, then," he pressed on. "Molly will-."

"Sirius," Severus said quietly. The name sounded strangled as if he was trying to express more into it and couldn't find the way.

"Please, Sev. Something—something has to happen. We can't keep doing this."

Severus didn't respond for a long moment. "Then we don't," he whispered, and Sirius froze, ice chilling his skin.

“Don’t say that,” he said. Severus didn’t respond, sparking irritation in Sirius’s chest. He eagerly let anger incite in him; the boiling heat melted the frozen block of ice pressed against his heart. “You-I’m not letting you self-sabotage our relationship. Talk to Molly, god damn it! I can’t keep doing this, and I know you can’t either!”

“I can’t-,” Severus continued, and Sirius cut him off. For a brief moment, he teetered on the brink of a shouting match; a scream built in his throat. However, something caught in his chest and he managed to drive the anger towards encouragement. He didn’t want to fight; he was so tired of war.

“Yes, you can. You did Christmas. You’re the bravest man I know, so don’t look at me like that! Just talk to Molly, okay? I can’t help you anymore, Sev, but I know she can. She has,” Sirius continued, softening his voice.

Severus drew in a shaky breath, and Sirius waited. While Severus had seemed to regain some semblance of himself at Christmas, the following days had proven difficult. Severus had started to pull away again, and Sirius felt like he held water in his hands as he watched his love slip away.

He had closed himself off, and Sirius had stopped keeping track of his panic attacks. All he knew was that it was breaking him, and for both his sake and Severus’s, something had to change.

He hoped Molly would be enough.

“Stay with me then,” Severus whispered, swallowing with trouble. Sirius blinked hard.

“Of course.”

“Then give me…thirty minutes.”

“Yes, of course.”

Severus nodded, eyes squeezed shut. Sirius watched him for a moment before coming up behind him and lightly looping his arms around the man. He pressed a string of gentle kisses along his neck, pausing in the crook of his neck. Severus gripped with pale fingers at his arm, and they stood in silence.

After some time had passed, Sirius pulled away, and with a heavy sigh, pressed a kiss against the top of Severus’s head and left the room. He heard people from the living room, but a quick glance only revealed the children. He walked to the kitchen and stood at the door.

Molly was scrubbing angrily at a pan, and Remus and Tonks watched her with concern. She glanced up at Sirius and froze.

“He said he’ll talk to you, Molly.”

“About time,” she said angrily, but the bags under her eyes conveyed her worry. The pot clattered against the sink, and she stormed out the room. Sirius quickly exchanged a glance with Remus who looked at him with concern. Sirius tried to smile but found he couldn’t manage it, so he quickly turned and followed Molly.

He quickened his pace and just made it before Molly closed the door of his bedroom. Sirius hovered by it as Molly strode to Severus, who now sat in his chair. He stared at the corner of the room, and a tension line creased his brow.

Molly grabbed the other chair and pulled it up to Severus. She sat down, staring hard at him. Given her proximity, Severus had to look at her, eyes flashing quickly before looking back down.

"Severus," Molly began, voice sharp. Severus didn't respond, but Sirius gripped his hand into a fist. "Five days. Five days I've been worried sick about you."

Severus still didn't respond but his shoulders tensed. Molly shook her head.

"At the very least, you owe me an explanation."

Severus closed his eyes and sat up rigidly. Sirius could read the tremors across his face, and it was killing him to see him in pain. But he trusted Molly, trusted that she would do what was right.

"I haven't-," Severus began, breaking off.

"Haven't what, dear?" Molly asked, voice softening marginally. Severus didn't speak for a moment.

"I've haven't been okay," he admitted, hands gripping the armrest. "I can't—I don't want to have to see you—."

"Why not?" Molly asked quietly, and Severus exhaled heavily.

"Don't want you to see me. As I am."

"And what is that?"

Severus bit his lip and turned his head away. "You know what."

Molly sighed and rested a hand on Severus's knee. To Sirius's surprise, he didn't flinch away. She didn't speak, and the silence stretched.

"I was used. By him. By many others. He – who you met – he's *me.* And-and I don't know how you can see that and not want to-."

"Want to what?" Molly pressed gently, and Severus frowned and closed his eyes.

"Hate me. Leave me. I don't know, that's what I would do."

Molly reached out and lightly pressed the back of Severus's head into the crook of her shoulder. Severus leaned into it and shuddered.

"I did something terrible, too. Not just that. The Dark Lord – he – I didn't think I had a choice. But Molly, I didn't want to, I never do, but I don't know what else- what else I can do," Severus said, losing his carefully held control as he started to hyperventilate. He sounded panicked and frightened, and Sirius resisted the urge to cross over and comfort him. Molly shushed him, and he fell silent.

"Severus, my child," Molly said quietly, and Severus flinched.

"I don't – I don't deserve-," he protested, but Molly shushed him again.

"My child, it's not a question of what you deserve. It never is. You will have my love no matter what, no matter what you have done or what's been done to you. Shh, listen to me. I know

you don't want to accept that. You never have. But, Severus, I have seen you as you are." Molly paused, appearing as if she internally debated over something. She sighed and rubbed her hand on Severus's back.

"I know you hide your scars," she began quietly, and Severus flinched. He tried to speak, but Molly shushed him again. "That spell of yours never broke, but you did show me. I don't know if you remember or not, but I have seen what was done to you. And, Severus, I am not so innocent or naïve to think I don't know what you have done. And I love you for it. I love you regardless of it.

"And my child, I'm so sorry it was dragged out into the light like this. I'm so sorry it had to happen again. I'm so sorry none of us were there to stop it. Just like the rest of this war- I only pray you have a chance to move past this. To be free. You don't know how badly I want to see you and Sirius-," Molly broke off. She held Severus tightly. "You can't close yourself off to me, dear. You can't close yourself off to the world. None of us could stand losing you, and none of us want to—want to see you suffer."

Molly broke off again. "My dear child," she whispered into his hair. "My dear, beautiful child. You deserve so much more than what you've been given." She fell silent and held Severus tightly, tears streaming down her face. Severus's face was hidden, and despite his silence, Sirius could see the telltale shudder in his shoulders.

Time passed, and Sirius watched silently. He, himself, wanted to cry at Molly's words: the sheer expression of motherhood and its unquestioning love. Some small part in his own heart ached for that same expression of love.

Molly pressed a kiss onto Severus's head and pulled back to grasp the sides of his face. They stared at each other, something fragile passing between them, and eventually, Severus blinked and looked away.

"It was for money," Severus said quietly. Noting Molly's confusion, he continued. "When my mother died, we needed money. I think he thought this would be the easiest way. I was, um, fifteen when it started. I couldn't leave or tell anyone or else he would have…have hurt Lily. I didn't ever want anyone to know," he said, face furrowing and voice breaking ever so slightly. "No one did until, well I suppose the Dark Lord did, but besides him, until Sirius. And, um, there was a punishment. For saving Arthur's life. I don't want to tell you, Molly. I wouldn't have changed what I did. But that's why I ended up with…because I wanted to get drunk and stop thinking and I didn't think I could come back here.

"I'm sorry I didn't talk to you. I haven't—I haven't been doing okay. And I didn't- I didn't know if I could handle it if you," Severus fell quiet, but the sentiment felt clearly expressed. He drew in a deep breath and met Molly's gaze again. "That's my explanation. That's what I owe you."

"Thank you. Thank you, Severus." Molly pressed a kiss against his forehead and pulled his head against hers. "My brave, beautiful child." They sat like that for a long moment, until Molly pulled away and asked a question that Sirius had always felt too frightened to ask. "Severus, darling, that-do you know why - do you know why you were sixteen?"

Severus sucked in air through his teeth and shook his head. "No, I didn't even know-didn't even know until Sirius – but I can't remember anything that happened." He fell silent and his eyes fluttered shut. A few seconds passed, and when Severus opened his eyes again, he was *different.*

Sirius stumbled forward, trying to get a better view of Severus's face, but it *was* different.

He didn't hold himself like that, not like the entire world pressed against him and he had broken under the weight of it. Molly's eyes widened, and she stared at Severus.

"Severus," she stated, sounding alarmed.

Severus, or not Severus if Sirius was honest, chuckled, but it was a broken form of his laugh and conveyed a level of weariness that seemed farther than anything Severus had ever expressed.

"I'm not Severus," he said slowly, every syllable dripping with agony.

"Then who- who are you?" Molly said, an undercurrent of fear lining her voice. Sirius felt all the air leave his room.

The not-Severus thought for a moment. "I am not sure," he admitted, the idea of it seeming to cause him even more pain.

"Then where is, where is Severus?" Molly tried again, and Sirius had to commend her. He couldn't gather enough a breath to even squeak out a sound.

The not-Severus slowly raised a hand and tapped a finger against his temple. He moved as if through molasses as if every twitch of his muscle carried an incalculable amount of pain. "Asleep."

"Is he, will he wake up?" Molly asked, and for every moment it took for not-Severus to respond, Sirius could feel his soul splintering.

"Yes," the man said. Molly let out a sigh of relief. "We do not intend to hurt him," he said, every few words breaking into a labored breath.

"We?" Molly asked, and not-Severus blinked slowly.

"The Child. The Teenager. The Heart-Broken. The Sinner. The Agonized," he listed slowly, eyes flickering over to Sirius. "You," not-Severus breathed out, and Sirius stumbled forward as if he had been dragged. He fell to his knees and looked up at not-Severus.

"Who are you?" he choked out, desperation and fear coating his lungs. Not-Severus regarded him for a long moment.

"He loves you," he said in that agonized voice of his. "Like so few others. He does not love easily, but when he does-," not-Severus broke off as a spasm of pain crossed his face. Automatically, Sirius reached out to hold Severus's hands.

"Who are you?" he asked again, even though he already knew. He brought the man's hand to his mouth and kissed it. Not-Severus watched him, his muscles spasming as wave after wave of pain crashed through him.

"The Agonized," not-Severus exhaled, and Sirius wanted to kiss the pain from his face.

"Who-?" he repeated as if a broken record. Molly glanced at him in worry.

"We protect him," the Agonized continued. "We bear his pain. We relive his memories. So that he does not have too. So that he may-." Another spasm of pain caused the Agonized to break off, and he shut his eyes tightly, wincing.

“He does not know us. He cannot. Not until-until he does not need me. Not until he-he is free. Do you understand?” Every syllable was a broken sound, and his shoulders trembled from the effort.

Sirius could scarcely process the words, but thankfully, Molly was there.

“Yes, we do. We understand,” Molly softly, grabbing the other hand of the Agonized.

The Agonized nodded.

“Is there anything we can do to help you?” Molly asked, and the Agonized slowly raised his gaze to look at her. Whatever Molly saw made her face crumple.

“Protect him. That is all I can ask.”

“Of course,” Molly said, voice breaking. The Agonized slowly turned his head to look back at Sirius, and Sirius felt all the air leave his lungs under that gaze.

“Do you love him?” the Agonized asked, swallowing hard.

“Yes,” Sirius said, the word leaving him in a breathless rush. “I love him. Truly. Deeply. In every sense of the word.”

The Agonized nodded. “Good,” he breathed deeply. “You might be enough,” he whispered. “I will go. Return to where you were. I will wake him. But do not tell him.” His eyes fluttered shut before Molly or Sirius could say another word. Molly glanced at Sirius, and he stood up quickly, returning to his position by the door.

About thirty seconds passed before Severus opened his eyes. Sirius searched his face and could barely hide his sigh of relief when he saw his lover sitting before him. Severus’s brow crinkled for a brief moment, and he looked at Molly in confusion.

“What did you ask?” he said, his voice returning to normal.

“Only if you’re going to talk to Albus?” she replied smoothly, able to keep the surprise out of her voice. Severus’s expression instantly soured before turning to resignation.

“You don’t think he’ll-,” Severus continued, and if the past few minutes hadn’t been seared onto Sirius’s memory, he could have scarcely guessed at what had happened.

“No, of course not. He cares for you too Severus.”

Severus nodded, “I suppose so. Thank you, Molly,” he added, and Molly smiled, the tips of it trembling with emotion.

“Of course, Severus. Of course,” she finished, pulling him into a hug. Severus folded into it, and when he pulled away, Sirius was able to see a trace of that steady confidence returning to him.

Severus ran his hands down his thighs and rested them on his knees. “Is there anything else, Molly? That you want…?” His gaze flickered up to her.

“Yes,” Molly said, leaning back. “You’re joining us for dinner tonight, dear. I’ll make that pasta you’re so fond of. Okay?”

“There’s no use arguing?” Severus said slowly but with the hint of a smirk. Molly smiled in

response.

"Of course not, dear. Don't be ridiculous." The smile faded from Molly's face after a moment. "Is there anything else you want to talk about? I do love you, Severus. And I'm proud of how far you've come from who you used to be."

"Thank you," he said thickly and swallowed with some difficulty.

Molly smiled softly. "Good. See that wasn't too bad was it?" Severus nodded, and Molly tilted her head, watching him closely. "Dinner, okay? If not, I'm dragging you out of here."

"Yes, Molly," he affirmed, and Molly smiled.

"Any chance we could get a chessboard?" Molly asked, turning to Sirius. Sirius startled.

"Yeah, I can ask Kreacher," he responded with a note of surprise.

"Thanks, dear." She turned back to Severus and leaned backwards. "Now I haven't played in quite some time but I will try my best. And it's not like I win against you anyway."

Severus smirked, and Sirius drank in that half-smile. "You won once," he corrected, and Molly pulled a face.

"Once. Out of how many? Exactly."

Sirius noted how Severus relaxed his shoulders. "Fair point," Severus conceded. "But I'm rusty too."

"Oh good, I'll feel even worse when I lose," she teased, and Sirius felt deep relief spread through his chest. He slipped out the door, calling Kreacher to find them a chessboard. He then joined Remus and Tonks in the kitchen and let the day unravel.

When he saw Severus at dinner, he almost wanted to cry from the relief that just like the others, this nightmare would pass.

Date

Chapter Notes

I adore this chapter. It feels like a breath of fresh air (and fluff!) after a very long, angst-ridden time.

This chapter has some smut, so skip the end if you are so inclined.

Otherwise, please enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"How did it go?" Sirius asked, crossing the room to pull Severus into his arms. Severus leaned into him, head pressing against his shoulder.

Severus sighed, and tension began to ease out of him. "Good," he whispered into Sirius's shirt. "It was like Molly. He understood, and he wasn't- it helped." He paused, and Sirius held him closer. "It's gotten better," he admitted. "I think…I think I should be okay. And I'm-I'm sorry for how I treated you, puppy. I shouldn't have-."

Sirius shushed him. "I know, love. It's okay. I'm just glad you're back, you know? You're not someone I ever want to lose, and I'm sorry that I wasn't there for you – I had promised-."

It was Severus's turn to shush him, and Sirius fell quiet, hands clutching at Severus's back. "I love you," Severus said quietly. "You-," he broke off. "You beautiful-." Sirius pressed a kiss against the side of his head, and they stood silently, breathing in each other's presence.

"Albus also-," Severus began, his voice sounding more controlled and reserved. The moment had passed, and Sirius loosened his grip and stepped back slightly. Severus pressed his fingertips to his nose and sighed. "He wants me to teach Potter Occulmency."

"What?" Sirius asked, blinking in shock. "After all this, he expects-."

Severus stepped away and started to pace. "Yes."

"But if Voldemort-."

"I tell him. So he understands it's something I'm forced to do."

"But Sev-."

"The boy needs to learn to protect his mind. The Dark Lord will now know there's a connection and will seek to exploit it," Severus explained, and Sirius had a brief moment of relief when he looked and saw the Severus he thought he had nearly lost.

His talk with Molly had revived him. And his talk with Albus had finally brought him back to himself. Along with the help of those *personalities*, or whatever lived within him.

Sirius and Molly had spoken briefly on it and had planned to discuss it further with Albus. But they had agreed that Severus was not to know. While Sirius despised lying to someone who

already lived in a world of deceit, he couldn't deny the Agonized's request. He had no right to disrupt the fragile internal balance that lived within Severus, especially when he understood so little.

He had done some research though, and Dissociative Identity Disorder seemed the best summary of whatever had happened. The personality splits were catalyzed by trauma, oftentimes stemming from childhood, which Sirius knew Severus hardly lacked. They seemed to have acted as a protection mechanisms to shield him from the worst of what was done to him.

The names certainly seemed to align. The Child for his nightmare of a childhood. The Teenager for his years of sexual abuse, isolation and bullying. The Heart-Broken for Lily. The Sinner for his years as a Death Eater. The Agonized for all the pain he had endured.

And then Severus, the man who had, despite it all, prevailed.

Sirius itched to know more, but in the midst of a war, there was hardly the time or emotional resources. Rather, he could hope they would both survive and process the trauma when every day didn't hold the potential for pain and grief.

And then maybe they could take care of that damned voice in his head that had emerged after that night at the lake when Sirius had nearly lost his soul. It would be nice to not have it whispering horrible truths in the back of his head, but again, it would have to be post-war. They already had too much burdening them than both of their considerable mental illnesses.

"Sirius?" Severus asked, tilting his head and looking concerned. Sirius blinked out of his thoughts and internally cursed at himself.

"Why you?" he picked up, continuing with the conversation. He pushed the thoughts of the voice and Severus's other personalities out his head. Another time.

Severus scowled. "Because I'm gifted in the skill. And Albus believes my technique will serve Potter best."

"But you're most at risk, right? It's not like if Remus taught him it would matter?" Sirius protested, and Severus shook his head.

"Albus believes it has to be me."

"Why?" Sirius asked, needing an undeniable reason. Otherwise, he was going to raise hell to make sure Severus didn't walk into something else that would lead to more suffering.

"Because I can protect my mind from the Dark Lord. Few others can, and certainly not Lupin. And so, Albus believes to protect Potter, he needs to employ the person with the greatest experience and success rate. Which happens to be me."

"Even though you'll probably be tortured over it," Sirius responded, voicing the underlying fear.

Severus's scowl deepened and he rubbed at his face. "Nothing I haven't survived before. And doesn't particularly matter considering the importance of protecting the boys mind."

"It matters to me, Sev," Sirius protested, and Severus met his eyes. He looked weary but resigned to his lesser status. Sirius realized he had probably never had anyone fight for him on something like this before. "It really never ends of you does it?" Sirius said with a shaky laugh. "Promise me you'll be careful. You'll only do what you think you can. Also, you really don't have

to do it, if you don't want. I'll go to Albus and tell him it's got to be someone else."

"Thank you, Sirius," Severus sighed. "I'll be fine." Sirius shot him a look, and Severus glanced away. "I got you a gift."

"Huh?" Sirius asked, startled by the sudden shift in the conversation.

"A present. For Christmas," Severus explained. He summoned a small package from his coat pocket. He handed it to Sirius who stared at it, throat aching with emotion.

"You didn't have to," Sirius started, but Severus placed his hands over Sirius's to shush him.

"Open it," he ordered gently, and Sirius did just that, pulling at the wrapping paper. He revealed a small box and took off the top. Two potion vials sat among padding. They both held a viscous sickly green liquid, and Sirius glanced at Severus for an explanation.

"It's Polyjuice. But with my modifications, so it'll last longer and won't be as uncomfortable. Also can't be detected by any wizarding law enforcement. One is for you to get a wand. The second is for you to go wherever you want."

Sirius stared at him speechless. He bit at his lip to keep the gratitude from bubbling out. "Severus," he managed, trying but failing to keep his voice unaffected. "Ever mention how much I love you?"

"Maybe once or twice?" Severus smirked, but the smirk was gentle, more of a smile than anything else. "Merry Christmas, Sirius."

Sirius kissed him, honestly surprised at how even with everything, he could fall even more in love with the man standing in front of him.

"Stop walking like that," Severus growled. "You look suspicious."

The dark-haired woman beside him jolted and glared at him. "Well, I'm not really used to just walking around like this, am I?" she hissed back. Her pace sped up, and Severus looped an arm through hers to pull her back and slow her down.

"It's fine, puppy," Severus comforted, and the woman-Sirius scowled.

"You sure this can't be picked up by the police? I really can't go back-," Sirius began, and Severus shot her a glance.

"Yes, puppy. As long as you don't look like you're running away from a crime, no one will bother you."

"But-," Sirius protested.

"Trust me, love," Severus said, and Sirius sighed, running a hand through her hair, surprised when it didn't end where it typically did.

"God, I feel so weird," she said, pulling a face. Severus smirked, and they approached The Leaky Cauldron. Sirius stared wide-eyed at everyone, but they passed without problem. Severus tapped the bricks, and they walked through, entering the general brouhaha of Diagon Alley.

Sirius walked jerkily, unused to so many people, but Severus pulled her tight against him

and people parted in their path. Something in Severus's expression seemed to unnerve them, and a few gave Sirius a long stare.

"This is a lot," he whispered, senses feeling too raw. He hadn't been around this many people like this in – years. It was starting to become too much.

"It's okay. We're almost there," Severus responded quietly, his hand a steady presence on Sirius's arm. Sirius leaned into it and tried to pull himself together. He wouldn't break down here, he refused-

She froze, jolting to a stop. Severus was yanked back and turned to look at Sirius, eyes flashing with concern. "What is it?" he asked, stepping closer.

Sirius tried to suppress the fear that had surged within him at the sight of the Wizarding Police standing only a few yards away. The breath left his lungs, and he clung to Severus. Severus followed her line of sight and looked back in understanding.

"My love, puppy, do you trust me?" Severus asked, voice low and deep. Sirius looked at him.

"I can't go back," he exhaled between frantic breaths. "I can't-I can't," he started to repeat before a look from Severus silenced him.

"My puppy, you're okay. You're with me. I won't let them take you anywhere. Do you understand? I'll protect you."

Sirius nodded, trying to realign all his focus solely on Severus's eyes. He still felt too bare and could feel the walls collapsing on him. The black voice started to scream.

"Then I want you to focus solely on me. Do what I do. Ollivander's is close by. We're almost there. Just walk with me until we are, okay?" Severus's voice was over-powering in its steadiness, and Sirius managed another nod.

Severus looped his arm around her again and began to murmur low words of comfort under his voice. Sirius leaned heavily onto him and after a moment willed her feet to move. She focused on the ground but could feel the heavy weight of their gaze resting on him. She itched to run, but Severus held her too tightly.

Her sense of time grew warped and it felt like years until she heard the jingle of a bell and the woody scent of wands overpowered her. It took her a moment to unclench her hand from Severus's arm and stand upright. She felt dizzy and exhausted, and the start of a headache pounded behind her temples. The dark voice kept screaming, and she felt sick with it.

"Mister Snape," Ollivander greeted, "And I don't believe I recognize your partner." Severus stepped forward, and Sirius blinked hard to refocus on the situation. There were no police chasing after her. She was going to be fine. Severus would protect her.

"She lives in Sweden. Only on visit here for a little bit. However, a potion accident, unfortunately, stripped her of her wand, and we'll need a replacement if that would be possible," he explained, the lie falling easily off his tongue. Sirius stepped forward and offered a hesitant smile. Ollivander smiled back and nodded.

"Of course. We'll find just the one."

It only took three tries to find Sirius her wand, and she thought back to when he was 11 and

how it had been absolute chaos to find a wand that fit him. It had taken an hour and his mom had complained throughout it all. But the one he found he had loved.

This new one, he couldn't really say the same. But it felt steady in her hand and secure and steady, and maybe that's what she really needed – not an upstart wand brimming with mischief and magic, but one he could rely on. Severus paid for it, exchanged pleasantries, and left.

The Wizarding Police were gone when they walked back into the street, and they strolled down a few quieter side alleys that lacked the general chaos of the main strip. They slipped inside a few shops and bought an obscene amount of chocolate at one. Sirius still felt tense and uneasy, but it was mitigated by the general enjoyment of being with Severus and the fact that he supposed that this was their first date.

"We've been-," Severus began when Sirius had brought up that point, but then his brow crinkled in thought. "Well it's certainly been unconventional, hasn't it?"

Sirius laughed and kissed him, and Severus smiled back. He tasted like chocolate, and Sirius was tempted to call it day and take Severus to bed as soon as humanly possible.

However, she didn't, and they finished off the last remaining minutes of Polyjuice with a mug of hot chocolate before apparating home.

The transformation was uncomfortable, but not painful, and when it was over, Severus had kissed him again, and Sirius had joked about his manliness, and Severus had smiled.

Severus then started to undress him, buttons slowly becoming undone. Sirius had kissed him hard and deep. He then pushed Severus back into bed and over the next hour, clearly expressed his appreciation and love for the man.

He had then spent the hours following that casting dumb, fun spells with his wand, relishing in the feeling of easy magic again. Severus had alternated between scowling and laughing, and Sirius decided it had been a very good day indeed.

Sirius had curled up on the bed, his book firmly in hand. He had been pushing himself through *Anna Karenina* with some difficulty. The many Russian names had been throwing him for a loop, but he had started keeping a list and had found it much more enjoyable since then.

The familiar crack startled him, and he jumped slightly, but then relaxed when he saw Severus.

Severus had an amused smirk on his face and threw a newspaper on Sirius's lap. Sirius shot him a look before turning to the paper and flipping through it.

It was pretty standard, but he paused at the gossip column. Was that…?

"Potion Master with New Love Interest," Sirius read, quickly scanning over the rest of the article. It was typical drama – an inquiry of who could be this mysterious woman who had seduced the sexy professor every Hogwarts girl crushes on. A blurry picture depicted Severus and said woman in a kiss, and Sirius glanced up at Severus, a smile breaking across his face. "You're kidding me?"

"No," Severus sighed, kicking his shoes off and lying on top of the sheets. "Skeeter has had a gossip rag on me for a while. Don't really know why." He stretched his arms over his head and shut his eyes.

“Because you’re, how does it say, the mysterious, tortured potions master who inspires desire in every teenage girl?” Sirius said, glancing over at Severus who scowled in response.

“Absurd. No one thinks of me like that. Except perhaps Skeeter.”

Sirius arched an eyebrow. “Wouldn’t be so sure of that, Prof. You are pretty hot.”

Severus’s scowl deepened. “I would have to disagree.” Sirius’s noted there was no self-malice in his voice, so he continued on.

“I don’t know, Sev. You’ve got this whole act going,” Sirius explained, trying to imagine himself as a teenage girl in one of his classes. God, he would be fucked.

“Act?” Severus drawled. Sirius winked.

“Commanding and severe but also mysterious and tortured. Like there are hidden depths to your façade, and it would really take someone special to open you up. Oh, and sexy, Sev. Just really fucking sexy,” Sirius explained. His tone stayed light as he glanced over the article again.

Severus rolled his eyes. “I don’t see it.”

“Yeah, that’s the entire part of the charm. You probably have had girls trip over you, and yet you say and do nothing. People want what they can’t get, especially love-struck teenage girls.”

“I’m not going to pursue underage girls,” Severus said seriously, and Sirius shook his head.

“Of course not. For all your many faults, you’re not a creep. But doesn’t mean shit to them.”

Severus sighed. “Still absurd.” He paused and thought for a moment. “Does this apply to you, Black?” Sirius inhaled sharply but tried to hide it. Severus had reverted to dropping Sirius’s surname every so often, and it had been doing wonders for his libido.

“If I was a teenage girl in your class, Sev, I’d be fucked.”

“And if you’re a thirty-six-year-old man in my bed?”

“Just as fucked, if not more so,” Sirius smirked. “I think it would break all of Skeeter’s followers if they found out just who this new mysterious love interest was.”

Severus huffed out a laugh. “After the war ends, I’ll parade you around. Make sure they all see.”

The words fluttered something in Sirius’s stomach. “Mhmm, I think I would like that. Show them who you belong to.”

Severus was silent for a long moment, his eyes still shut. “I’m sorry, you’ll have to remind me. Who do I belong to again?” he asked, voice dropping low. It was the voice that *did* things to Sirius.

Sirius threw his book aside and in one smooth move, crouched over Severus. Severus kept his eyes shut, and Sirius stared down at him for a moment. There really was something seductive in the severity of his face. No surprise girls lost their mind over him.

He bent down and pressed a slow, languorous kiss on Severus’s lips. “You belong to me,”

he growled. Severus's breath hitched. Sirius kissed the breath from his mouth, tongue moving slowly in Severus's mouth. Severus stretched upwards, arching his back.

"Who?" Severus asked again. Sirius bit against his neck and then sucked. He used his tongue to soothe the spot and pressed a string against Severus's face before sitting up and straddling the man. "You're mine," Sirius growled, almost animalistic, and Severus's eyes flew open. The heat in them threatened to bowl Sirius over.

"Tell me how you want me," Severus growled in return, and it was suddenly very, very hot in the room.

"Stay," Sirius ordered and began to unbutton Severus's shirt. He moved slowly and could see the frustration and anticipation begin to color Severus's face. During it, he thought about what he wanted to happen and decided with absolute certainty over what he was about to do.

Severus sat up slightly so Sirius could take his shirt off, and Sirius traced with heavy hands the soft skin of his chest. He wanted to crawl inside, to creak open Severus's ribs and fit himself in. His hands rested on Severus's stomach and he felt every desperate breath enter and leave Severus. It was enough to drive him mad with lust.

Sirius yanked off his shirt, and Severus's gaze skittered over his tattoos. Sirius knew he wasn't as nearly attractive as he had been before, but the look in Severus's eyes would sometimes convince him otherwise.

Sirius reached down to unbutton both their pants and Severus arched his hips up so that Sirius could yank down his pants and boxers. Severus was already half-hard, and Sirius ached to touch it.

Grudgingly, he sat himself up so he could pull off his pants and boxers too. Sirius could feel his mind begin to melt.

"I want," he began, feeling winded. Severus peered up at him.

"Yes?" he asked slowly.

"This," Sirius stuttered out, summoning the vial of lube from the nightstand and squirting some on his fingers. He sucked in a deep breath to steady himself and slipped his hand behind him, fingers searching until he found what he was looking for. With a harsh breath, he pushed in.

He fell forward and had to use his other hand to support himself and avoid crushing Severus. His legs quivered when he pushed in another.

Severus stared up at him, eyes wide and face slack with desire. "You. I-again," he tried to say, but Sirius shushed him. He *wanted* this. Severus's absence had been terrible for him. He *needed* this reaffirmation that he was here and that he was Sirius's.

He pushed another finger in and couldn't suppress a moan as they pressed against something deep within him. Severus looked up at him, eyes dark and marred with lust. The intensity of his gaze burned into Sirius, and he had to look away.

Sirius steadied himself, and when he felt ready enough, he pulled out his fingers. He looked down at Severus, who looked increasingly unmoored. Sirius set a look of determination on his face and positioned himself above Severus's cock. He used one hand to position it, and before he could really think about what he was doing, he pushed himself down.

Severus's eyes slammed shut, and he gripped hard at the sheets. "Fuck," he moaned. "Sirius," he whimpered.

"*Ah*, *Jesus,* fuck, okay," Sirius managed. Severus's cock was big, he had known that, found it incredibly attractive but until now did he *really* understand. "Why you gotta be so damn big?" he moaned, and Severus brought a hand to his mouth to bite it. "Nah, don't do that," Sirius protested, "*ah,* I wanna, *fuck,* hear you moan," he said, accidentally shifting his hips. Severus's breath grew erratic, but he did pull his hand away and rest it on Sirius's thighs.

"You beautiful *oh*-," Severus forced out, voice stilted, breaking off when Sirius decided now he wanted to start moving. While it initially started out uncomfortable - Severus was always too much for him - the more he moved the better it felt. Scratch that – it felt fucking mind-blowing.

He found a rhythm much easier than he expected, and he needed more and more and *fuck fuck fuck.*

Severus moaned beneath him, eyes staring but unseeing and hand grasping helplessly at Sirius's thigh. He was obscene, Sirius distantly thought in the one part of his mind still able to form cognizant thoughts. No one had the right to be like him.

Severus keened against him, raising his hips to match Sirius's rhythm. Sirius nearly lost himself there as the friction became overpowering and the feel of Severus moving in and out of him was nearly too much, it was all too much, how could he ever have lived without this -.

"*Fuck*, Si-*Sirius.* You beautiful, beautiful *ah* man. I'm-*god*-yours. Always yours-*ah,"* Severus moaned, and Sirius increased his rhythm and now he was muttering, but he couldn't process what he was saying, couldn't understand what was happening beyond the feel of Severus inside of him.

He felt the precipice approaching, and Severus somehow noticed through his pleasure-filled haze because he slipped his hand down to stroke Sirius's cock and that was it, that was-.

Sirius fell forward as he orgasmed, falling heavily onto Severus. Severus followed shortly after, and Sirius felt him coming inside him which only prolonged his own pleasure. It was only after several minutes of shaky breathing was he able to pull himself together and fall beside Severus.

Severus lay beside him, chest rising and falling rapidly. His eyes were shut, but one hand reached out to grab onto Sirius's bicep. Sirius admired it, the curve of his fingers, the faint scars from potions accidents.

"God," Severus finally managed. "You can't possibly exist, can you?"

Sirius laughed and pressed a string of kisses along his shoulder. "Looks like I can. You lucky bastard."

Severus snorted at the statement. "You don't have to tell me."

"Well, you sexy potion master," Sirius teased, "sex with you ought to be good." He grinned, and Severus laughed brightly at that. Sirius pulled him close, entangling their legs together, and sleep followed not soon after.

Chapter End Notes

We love all my messy pronouns in the Polyjuice scene - Sirius is a man but also a woman? So please excuse my he/she mixing, I wasn't entirely sure on how to handle it.

Also - I couldn't resist the urge to make Snape exactly like Alan Rickman - and in that, case very attractive (He's the Mr. Darcy we all deserve). I've written him in other stories as ugly (Used to the Darkness) /striking (Burning Doves), but I like to think as he matured, he grew into his more severe of features and that it proved to be rather attractive. Just because Harry doesn't see it, doesn't mean it doesn't exist ;)

Scars

Chapter Notes

Warnings: mentions of significant abuse, self-harm, scarring, past rape - more or less, what's already been covered in this story. It occurs in the second part of this chapter if you would wish to skip it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The following night, the Dark Lord summoned Severus.

Sirius couldn't sleep, so he was fully awake when Severus appeared and immediately collapsed onto the floor in a fit of spasms.

Sirius immediately went to him and gathered him in his arms. The violent trembling and the harsh squeezing of his eyes reminded him of that first night. Severus had shown up like this, in the aftermath of Cruciatus, and Sirius had ignored his hatred to provide the comfort Severus desperately needed.

How things change.

Sirius gently scooped him up and carried him to bed. He lay him down, wiping the sweat from his face and removing his outer layer of clothing. He placed the Death Eater mask beside him, and as he did so, Severus's eyes flew open and he grasped at Sirius. "C-crucio," he forced out between clenched teeth. "L-Long t-t-time. Please."

Sirius shushed him and climbed into bed beside him. He did what he did that very first night and spooned Severus, willing the pain to leave his body.

It didn't, not for a long while, but eventually, Severus relaxed against him. They fell into an uneasy sleep that the morning light ultimately disturbed.

"It was over Potter," Severus had explained wearily. The torture had taken a toll on him. "The Occulmency. But he will allow it. For now." He then fell silent, brow furrowed in worry. Sirius did his best to kiss away the fear. "Can you read to me?" Severus asked quietly.

"Of course, my love," Sirius said gently, grabbing open his copy of *Anna Karenina* and turning to the first page. He read to Severus for until his voice started to go hoarse, but Sirius would have read to him for hours more if needed.

"Happy birthday, my love," Sirius said, planting a kiss on Severus's lips. Severus frowned and began to unclasp his coat, fingers slow and sure. Sirius lifted a hand to cover Severus's. He glanced up at him confused.

"What?" he asked, voice low and surprisingly harsh. Sirius decided not to comment on it; he had learned that some of Severus's proclivities rooted in trauma. He doubted Severus had very pleasant birthdays as a child.

"I want to use the other Polyjuice tonight. To celebrate," Sirius answered. Severus arched an

eyebrow and lowered his hand. Sirius grinned and walked to the table to grab the vial.

"What do you want to do?" Severus asked slowly.

"Can I surprise you?"

Severus thought it over a moment, and Sirius noted how tired he looked. He had struggled to recover from the fallout of saving Arthur, and his Death Eater meetings had taxed him more than usual with the return of all the Azkaban escapees.

Sirius has asked him one night about his fellow prisoners. Severus's reserved recount of their excitement and depravity had sickened him. It had been three years, but he could still their maniacal laugher and piercing screams.

He *needed* to forget about it tonight.

"Fine," Severus said, shrugging lightly. He did seem off, Sirius thought. He hadn't really been sleeping well, despite Sirius's best efforts.

"Good," Sirius responded, grabbing the other strand of hair. He arched an eyebrow at Severus – Severus had provided the hair but no other information – and when Severus didn't respond, he dropped it in the potion and with a grimace, swallowed it in one gulp.

The change happened quickly after and when he glanced in the mirror, he stared back at a younger man, blond and bright with shocking blue eyes. Sirius tilted his head, and the blond man did the same.

He turned to Severus with a confused look on his face. "Who is this?" he asked, voice higher than usual.

"A past student. Went off to Brazil to explore the magical properties of hyacinth macaws."

"And you just happen to have his hair?" Sirius asked, grossed out and mildly concerned. Severus hadn't yet displayed any worrisome signs of having some weird hair fetish.

"It was part of a past experiment. I happened to have some stored over," Severus explained, and Sirius relaxed. He walked over to Severus and smiled.

"Any chance you have a thing for blonds then?" he teased and Severus rolled his eyes.

"I might make an exception," Severus responded, and Sirius leaned forward to kiss him again. He grabbed his coat and hat and wrapped a scarf around Severus's neck. "Okay, grab on," he said, and Severus clutched at his arm, and with a quick twist, they apparated away.

They landed hard on a beach. The sky was a steely gray and the ocean reflected its metallic nature. The wind was harsh and cut across the beach. The smell of brine and salt sank into the back of their throats. Sirius muttered a warming spell and rubbed his hands together.

Severus gazed out at the water and turned to Sirius. "What is this place?"

"I used to come here as a kid. For our family vacations. In the summer, of course, but I didn't want to wait. And there's an amazing restaurant here, so I thought we could get dinner. For our second date," Sirius added with a wink, and a look passed across Severus's eyes before he smothered it.

“I would like that,” he finally said, looping his arm through Sirius’s. He continued to gaze out over the water. “I went to the beach once,” he began slowly. “With Lily and her family. A long time ago.”

They both fell silent for a moment, lost in their respective memories. However, before the cold began to hurt, they started walking along the beach into the small town. It was largely empty, but light shone from windows in wooden, windblown houses. They caught glimpses of life in them – a shadow of movement, a family around a table, the saturated coloring of a Muggle’s TV.

The restaurant sat at the end of the street, a small Italian place named Tony’s. A few older patrons sat at the bar and table, safely tucked away from the bitter cold.

Sirius greeted the waitress with a smile, and Severus rolled his eyes when she blushed. She led them to a table against the window. A candle warmed the middle of the wooden table, and they settled comfortably in their chairs. Outside, it began to snow.

He and Severus fell into light conversation. Sirius enthusiastically described the time he had saved Reggie from drowning, and Severus had looked at him grimly, until Sirius broke into a story at how he had stepped on a crab in the ocean and freaked out and finally, Severus broke out in light laughter and small smiles. He rolled his eyes at Sirius’s past antics, and it sent a warm glow coursing through him.

Severus had opted for a carbonara and Sirius for Fettucine alfredo. It was a delicious meal, one that tugged at Sirius’s nostalgia. They split a bottle of good wine, and Sirius started to feel light-headed off it. The redness in Severus’ cheeks indicated that he felt the same, and the laughter started to come easier until they had descended into giggles over the stupid moments of Sirius’s childhood, for which there were many.

Over desert, Severus stared brightly at Sirius. His lips had twitched up in a smile, and Sirius had leaned over to kiss him, the taste of coffee tingeing their tongues.

Severus looked at him and thought for a moment as his eyes darkened. He leaned back. Sirius tilted his head and waited for him to speak.

“I don’t like my birthday,” Severus said quietly, fork twirling in the whipped cream. “No one ever cared about it. So I didn’t either.” He fell quiet and took another bite of the tiramisu. “I’m glad you cared, Sirius. This is the best birthday I’ve ever had.” His voice thickened at the end, and he glanced away.

“There’s still more to come, Sev,” Sirius said smiling. The words cast an immeasurable warmth through him, and he could feel it shining through his face. Severus shot him a look, and Sirius’s smile widened. With quick movements, he pulled out a small gift from his coat pocket and placed it in front of Severus.

Severus stared down at it, hands resting gently on his lap. He glanced up at Sirius but quickly looked back down. With meticulous movements, he unwrapped the gift and revealed a set of potion vials. His fingers carefully traced them, and he looked at Sirius for confirmation.

“Yup, I heard they’re pretty rare, aren’t they?”

Severus laughed at that, light and in disbelief, and shook his head. “Very much so. Family heirloom?” he guessed, regarding the vials carefully.

Sirius nodded. “Yeah, they’ve been passed down for a while. I wanted to give them to you.”

Severus's expression sobered. "Sirius, these are…these are invaluable. They were created by Everest Starling, and he was one of the greatest potioneers of all time. I've never heard of anyone who managed…"

Sirius shrugged. "Probably because all these old families are hoarding them in their basement. But they're yours now, Sev."

Severus gingerly traced his fingers over them. "I can't accept such a gift," he protested, and Sirius laughed.

"Yes, you can, my love. I want you to have them. And it would be such a shame to throw them back in some cupboard to be forgotten."

"Well, then, thank you. Very much. These will help immensely." Severus looked back at him, "You do give very good gifts, don't you?"

Sirius grinned at the flattery. "One of the many perks of dating me. Now, I'm getting the check, and I'll give you another gift when we get back," he finished, winking. Severus tried to suppress his smile into a grimace.

"Your gift doesn't happen to be your cock, is it?" Severus drawled, and Sirius laughed.

"You'll just have to unwrap it and see," he teased. Severus rolled his eyes, but the amusement lay clear on his face. Sirius laughed again and then waved down the waitress. They paid the bill and bundled up again to leave the warmth and comfort of the restaurant for the cold and snow.

Sirius pulled Severus close as they strolled through the quiet town. Snow caught in their hair, and their breath ghosted before them. The air froze, and typically, Sirius would want to get someplace warm as quickly as possible. However, with Severus, the pain and memories didn't bother him nearly as much. He felt safe.

As the Polyjuice started to wear off, they apparated back to the bedroom. Sirius transformed back, stretching against the ache in his muscles. Severus stared at him, his gaze intense, and Sirius gestured towards the bed.

In a few quick movements, they had both pulled off their clothes and tumbled backward into bed. Severus sat halfway against the headboard, and Sirius crouched above him, pressing kiss after kiss onto his cheeks and forehead and the dampness in his hair. Severus held Sirius's head tightly, eventually wrapping his arms around his neck to pull Sirius into a tight hug. Sirius braced against the bed and breathed in deeply the scent of Severus's hair and the place where his neck met his shoulder.

Severus held him silently for a moment, and Sirius could feel a faint tremble in his muscles. He waited, ignoring the heat in his stomach.

"Sirius?" Severus asked fragilely. Sirius hummed in response. "I want…to show you something. If that would be okay?" His voice sounded raw and hesitant. Sirius nodded against him and pulled away, staring down at the man he loved. He waited, keeping his expression open. Severus's eyes darted around the room before he inhaled deeply and got out from underneath Sirius to stand up.

Sirius remained on the bed and stared up at Severus, raking in his body: the smoothness of his chest, the sharp juts of his collarbone and ribs and hips, the way his cock rested against his

milky thighs. He loved it enough to leave him speechless. He waited in anticipation for Severus to speak.

Severus had hardened his expression, but Sirius could still detect the vulnerability behind his eyes.

"I want…I want to show you my scars," Severus said quietly. "So that you can see me, I suppose. My gift to you." Severus paused, and Sirius waited. "I hide them which I'm sure you know. They aren't…pleasant. If you don't want to see-."

Sirius shook his head. "No, I want to see you, Sev. I always do."

Severus swallowed thickly. "Okay, okay, I'm sorry-."

Sirius quieted him, and Severus stared at him, eyes vulnerable and frightened. Sirius murmured words of comfort, and with a deep breath, Severus muttered a spell under his breath.

It took a moment for the scars to start to appear. They rose on his skin, pressing upwards so that thin lines of white began to trace themselves along his chest. Scars bubbled against his skin, and worse began to appear - harsh, guttural lines and fractured spider webs and sharp, clean dashes and faded bite marks up his thighs and disfigured burns and what had once been smooth became a mottled horror of past abuse.

Severus kept his eyes firmly closed, and Sirius noted how none of the scars touched his face. Just below the neckline, where it could be easily hidden, and up and down his arms and legs and around his back.

Sirius's eyes were drawn to the remnants of the blood magic from the vampire coven of the summer, a festering white line textured over by what looked like a claw mark and a spotty discoloring of skin caused by some chemical.

It was too much, Sirius thought. No one should ever have to endure this. No person's body should ever suffer this much. He thought of the Agonized, and finally, he understood.

Severus brought his hand to his mouth to smother something and quickly turned around.

His back was worse, which Sirius could scarcely fathom. His front alone depicted countless acts of abuse and self-harm and torture and yet his back –.

His back was the true nightmare.

He understood why Severus hid them. He could scarcely stand his own scattering of scars that invoked memories of his trauma, but to carry so much pain, so many remnants of horrific acts…

He had gone numb in abject horror, and the only emotion he could conjure was gratitude. Gratitude for the five personalities in Severus that had blunted the impact, born the abuse, shielded him from the horror. Despite everything, they had given Severus his sanity and his courage and preserved his kindness and empathy and protected his ability to trust and love.

He didn't want to think of the man forced to vividly experience every mark on Severus's skin.

"C'mere," Sirius whispered, licking dry lips. Severus turned back around; he had opened his eyes but they were distant and blank. Sirius could scarcely fathom the amount of courage it had

taken Severus to show him his scars. It was up to him now to make it worth it.

Severus approached him slowly, every movement causing scars to ripple across his skin. Sirius didn't know where to put his gaze so he focused on Severus's eyes. He had beautiful eyelashes, Sirius thought. No one had taken that from him.

Severus stopped within arms distance, and Sirius reached out to tenderly grab Severus's wrist. His thumb ran up and down his wrist, tracing the faint remnants of Sirius could only recognize as a slit wrist. His thumb stumbled over the other signs of self-harm - the sharp, clean lines that sliced across the soft part of his arm.

Severus looked like he wanted to speak but swallowed hard and lowered his head. Sirius brought his wrist to his mouth and placed tender kisses on it. He maintained eye contact until Severus looked away, emotions threatening to overwhelm.

Sirius kissed him as gently as he could, lips pressing against scars in a tender act of love. He then carefully pulled Severus towards him, bringing him to lie down beside him on the bed. Severus looked at him with a question in his eyes, and Sirius leaned up to kiss him on his lips before settling on his collarbone.

He knew what he had to do. With gentle hands, he began to trace along Severus's scars, and with tender movements, he began to kiss the jagged lines and other signs of abuse as if he could take the pain and carry it instead.

It was the purest expression of love he had ever displayed, and he moved slowly and gingerly, leaving no scar untouched. Severus trembled against him throughout, hand pressed against his mouth and eyes staring unseeing at the ceiling.

There was no sense of time anymore. All there was Severus and his scars and whatever Sirius could do to ease the pain.

He moved down Severus, feeling bile rise in the back of his throat at the faded bites on his thighs. He then moved back to the marks of self-abuse, now on his thighs, and the image of a skinny, pale teenager sobbing in an empty classroom and cutting into himself drove into Sirius's mind and caused him to pause. He blinked back tears, swallowing hard against the lump in his throat.

Severus started to tense, but Sirius pulled himself together and continued down his legs. His mouth traced over the scars of hexes and curses, and he wondered why Severus's legs showed the majority of magical harm. His arms and hands were relatively unscathed, and Sirius wanted to ask but he bit down the question on the tip of his tongue. He would only speak if Severus did and given how badly Severus trembled, how tightly he held his hand against his mouth, it seemed unlikely.

Sirius figured it was almost best that way. Words would only offer disruption.

He reached Severus's feet, suppressing his natural revulsion, and pressed kisses along his soles which were showed signs of past burns. Sirius winced; one of the Aurors had tortured him along the soles of his feet when he first arrived in Azkaban. He hadn't even been able to comprehend that a pain like could exist.

He sat up, tracing his path back up to Severus's face. He stared back at him, eyes raw with emotion, and bare in his vulnerability. He looked strong, Sirius thought. He wanted to express it, but the words lodged in his throat.

Sirius ran his hands along Severus's side and with a gentle press, indicated that he wanted Severus to roll onto his stomach. After a moment, Severus did so, and Sirius started at the back of his ankles and worked his way upwards.

His legs were much the same, and Sirius wondered what curse left each scar. He figured it was Voldemort's doing, a result of punishment or entertainment, and the thought caused Sirius to draw in a shaky breath. Too many images were pushing into his consciousness, and he was immensely grateful that he could reassure himself that Severus was here with him and not trapped in some other horror.

His upper thighs lacked the signs of self-abuse, but Sirius almost wished for that instead of what he rationalized had to be what the men who raped Severus had done. The bites appeared deeper, and they continued all the way up onto his buttocks. There were also small crescent-shaped scars that when Sirius lay a hand over, realized were fingernails gripping far, far too hard.

His thoughts threatened to overwhelm, but he forced himself to continue. He could not display weakness here.

Severus's back was a travesty of scars. Many were faint, layered upon many others, and Sirius reckoned those were from his father. They looked like lashings, a flaying of skin, and he continued to gently trace his fingers along them, seeking to impose as much comfort as he could. Severus shuddered, breathing hard into the pillow.

At about Severus's mid-back, Sirius noticed that some of the fainter scars aligned in what looked like letters. It took him a moment as he traced them with his fingers and mouth that they spelled out a word.

He lifted his head to piece the fragments of letters together and when he saw it, he froze. Ice pierced through his lungs and heart, and he couldn't stop the building tears from slipping out.

F – R – E – A – K

The word reverberated in Sirius's head, and his imagination took over as he stared down at the letters. It must have hurt immensely, and it must have agonized him for years to come – to think he had been branded as something like that.

Sirius's heart broke for him.

Only with a remarkable act of will was he able to finish the rest of Severus. He soothed the faded burn scars that stretched across Severus's shoulder blades. He traced a particularly jagged and ugly scar that ran from his elbow to should blade. He kissed the small markings on the back of Severus's hands that were probably potion accidents and the only part that didn't make Sirius want to tear out his heart.

When he finished, he turned Severus around again and found his mouth, kissing long and deep and slow. His lungs ached for air, but he didn't stop because this was what he was meant to do and to think otherwise was wrong.

Severus gasped into his kiss, and Sirius felt wetness against his cheeks and he didn't know if it was from him or Severus or both.

When the kiss ended, Sirius pulled Severus tightly against him, tight enough to start to blur the beginning and end of each of them, and held him with as much love and security as he could as they gradually slipped into sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for all the comments/views/reads! I'm so happy this story has found an audience - it really inspired a desire to write, which has become one of my favorite things to do. I, fortuatnely, don't see myself stopping anytime soon, which has led me to be more creative and commited than I thought I could be. It's been a great hobby to learn.

Help

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Severus frowned and rubbed at his temples. He leaned heavily against his desk, wand held loosely in his hand. His head ached from constantly entering Potter's, and he had to blink against the vivid snapshots of Quidditch practice and Hedwig and the rest of the clutter in the boy's mind.

Glancing quickly at the door to make sure no one was there, he grabbed the necklace's pendant and with a crack, landed in Sirius's room.

Sirius lounged in one of the chairs, book propped against one of his knees and hair pulled up in a haphazard bun. He hadn't shaven for a few days, and while Severus generally didn't like beards, he thought Sirius would look nice with one.

To be fair, he thought Sirius would look nice with anything. He was still one of the most attractive people Severus had met, feelings aside.

Sirius looked up at him and rubbed at his jaw. Severus swallowed hard, fighting against the hot surge of shame. They hadn't talked about the night of Severus's birthday, and it lay heavy between them.

Severus still wasn't entirely sure why he had chosen to reveal his scars. Besides Molly, who he had shown in a distressed state, he had never truly shown anyone. Not in its entirety.

But he had shown Sirius. And to his immense relief, Sirius hadn't looked at him with disgust or hate. Rather, he had--.

Severus had never imagined something like that could exist. He knew of love, but he never thought someone would apply it to him in such a way.

It made him want to cry. Not tears of pain, but rather something else, something he couldn't describe and never wanted to lose.

He hadn't able to look at Sirius the following morning. It was too much, but when Sirius had grabbed his hand and kissed it gently before Severus left for Hogwarts, he knew then there was no one else. There would never be anyone else.

Some entity had decided to play a cruel joke and make them the closest approximation of soul mates Severus could have imagined. Not in a romantic, idealistic sense, but rather in a way that they were two souls who understood each other.

Understood each other in a way that Severus dizzy and breathless and in love.

Sirius coughed, interrupting Severus from his thoughts.

"Are you getting sick?" Severus reflexively asked and sat in his chair. Sirius frowned and rested his head on his hand.

"Might be. Some sort of cold. Remus was sick last week." He sounded congested, and Severus made a note to bring some cold potions for him tomorrow. "Nuff about that, how was Harry?"

Severus pressed his lips together and gripped the armrest. Sirius looked at him, noting his minor gives.

“That bad, huh?”

“He doesn’t *listen*,” Severus gritted between teeth, trying and failing to keep the frustration out of his voice.

“He said you aren’t particularly open to teaching him,” Sirius countered, voice muted. Severus' eyes flashed towards him, and Sirius met them steadily. “We talk, Sev. I asked him how it’s going.”

“And?” Severus asked a little too quickly.

“Between the two of you, it doesn’t seem to be going well at all.” Sirius sighed. “He will listen, babe. He’s a good kid.”

Severus gripped the armrest harder. “He isn’t though. I tell him to clear his mind, and he doesn’t even *try.”*

“It’s not easy,” Sirius countered, and Severus huffed out a bitter laugh.

“You think I don’t know that? But if he wants to protect his mind from the Dark Lord, he’s going to have to try a little harder than what he’s doing now.” Severus stood up and started to pace the room. A headache built up behind his temples, and he wanted to lie down. “I knew this would never work. The boy’s just like his father – immature and arrogant and --.”

“Severus,” Sirius said, his voice taking on a hard edge. Severus stopped and looked at him.

“You know what I mean.”

Sirius tilted his head, and Severus was grateful there was no malice in the act. “He’ll do what you say because he wants to protect his friends. In that way, he’s like James. So what’s going wrong?”

Severus sat down heavily and leaned his head against the back of his chair. “It’s because he hates me and won’t listen to me or doesn’t think I know what I’m saying or that I’m actually doing this on behalf of the Dark Lord – I don’t know!” He bit his lip after the outburst and settled further into the chair. He started to count his breaths to help steady himself.

“I’ve told him to trust you,” Sirius said quietly, and Severus stared at him. “But I know he doesn’t think fondly of you.” He paused, words titling on his tongue. “Why don’t you like him? He’s not a bad kid. He’s a lot like Lily really. And I think you would…”

Severus shut his mouth and stared at a spot on the wall.

“Severus…,” Sirius pressured gently, sticking out a leg to lay it against Severus’s.

“He’s a brat,” Severus spat out. Sirius seemed to catch something in his words that caused him to pause.

“He’s not though, is he? What is it?”

Severus scowled and made the mistake of looking at Sirius. The look in his eyes demanded honesty, and god damn it, it was too late for him to put up much of a fight.

“It’s convenient, Black,” Severus explained quickly, words heated and harsh. “Should I have spent the last four years lauding Potter’s many wonderful qualities only for the Dark Lord to rip me to shreds and Albus to lose the spy he had been cultivating? Should I have I treated him fairly when I knew all the snakes would hiss back to their loyal parents? Should I have, Black?”

Sirius only watched him, and his response infuriated Severus. Who did Sirius think he was? Who did he fucking think he was?

And then Sirius leaned over and kissed Severus, and Severus forgot about his irritation because well, he really did love this man and he guessed someone else now knew and could understand.

“Gee, Sev, I really thought you found Harry terrible. Which I never understood because he’s a good kid.” Severus scowled at that, and Sirius smiled softly back. “I should never forget you actually have a heart. Not like I could, really, you wonderful man.”

Severus shifted at the words and scowled harder to hide his response. Sirius laughed gently and rested his foot on the side of Severus’s calf.

“Severus, I know we don’t talk about this, but I’m hoping we get a life after this war. I want you to actually meet Harry, you know? I think you guys would get along.” Severus snorted, and Sirius laughed and shook his head. “He’s got a lot of Lily in him. More so than James, really. Probably for the better.”

Sirius’s foot slid higher, but Severus kept his gaze firmly focused on the man’s face. “He’s still terrible,” Severus maintained, but Sirius just smiled at it.

“So what’s with the Occulmency? From what Remus said of it, it sounds like you meditate? Clear your head so that people can’t see anything?” Sirius asked, and Severus stared at him disdainfully.

“Only idiots say that,” he responded scornfully. Sirius had the duty to look half-offended for Lupin.

Sirius held up his hands, “Okay, okay. It was never something I learned. So what do you do then?”

Severus pinched his nose and scowled. “It’s much harder than some hippy meditation. You have to defend your mind. However you can.”

“Is that what you’ve been telling Harry?”

“Yes,” Severus gritted.

“And so how are you teaching him that?”

Severus sighed in frustration. “I’ve been casting *legilimens*.”

Sirius’s mouth dropped open slightly, and he looked troubled. “You’ve been entering his mind?” he asked affronted. “And just…you realize that's-.”

“What?” Severus hissed, “Spare me that shit about moral rights. It’s a war, and if he can’t do this, then there are bigger issues than my teaching methods.”

“I know, I know, I get it.” He still looked troubled, and Severus wanted to yell at him. He

didn't though; he kept himself together.

"It's how I learned, Sirius," he continued, hoping Sirius would understand. Sirius glanced back up at him and the look in his eyes eased something in Severus. "After a certain point, you get tired of someone breaking into your mind. And you realize there are ways to stop it. Just meditating doesn't give you that. It gives you clarity, but it doesn't give the strength. And what he needs is strength."

"I…I understand. It – yes. Okay. Can you maybe convey that to Harry? I think he thinks you're sadistic," Sirius said softly, lost somewhere in his thoughts. His brow had crumpled in concern.

Severus nodded slowly. "I will," he said after a moment. "I'm not sadistic, Sirius," he whispered, unsure of why he needed to say those words.

Sirius nodded and met his gaze. His eyes were dark, troubled, and Severus wanted to reach out and comfort him. "I know. I know, my love."

They were quiet for a few moments, and then Sirius leaned forward to kiss Severus again, and the sharp edges began to dull. Sirius pulled away after a few moments, hand pressing hard against the book.

"How are you?" Severus asked suddenly. Sirius blinked at him and tilted his head. A smile began to form and then died as if the effort wasn't worth it.

"Fine," Sirius said shortly, curling his toes into Severus's calf. Severus waited for him to continue, and Sirius sighed. "Maybe not."

"Have you been playing the piano?" Severus asked gently, and Sirius stared at him soberly, lips twitching downwards.

"Yes. Thank you for that."

"Then what's wrong?" Severus continued, staring at Sirius. Sirius glanced away and his shoulders fell. He gestured towards his head.

"I don't really like winter," he started to explain after a moment. "The cold, umm, it reminds me of…"

Severus waited, knowing this would take time to come out. He was very much the same. Sirius sucked in a breath between his teeth. "And my mind hasn't been good to me, I guess you could say. Umm, I…" A few heartbeats. "I've been fucking up, Sev. Again and again and again, and we've been pretending that's not true, and I don't know if that's not true, but it says that-that-that before Christmas, I didn't look for you and I should have and I didn't-." Sirius broke off, breathing heavily.

"Sirius," Severus said slowly, but Sirius shook his head and glanced down.

"Other stuff too," Sirius muttered weakly. Something dark crossed his face, and he pressed his lips together.

Severus frowned at that and leaned forward. Anxiety spiked in his chest, and his headache worsened a fraction. Sirius gripped at his book, and when he met Severus's gaze, his eyes had hardened. "What is it?" Severus asked, voice wavering. Sirius scratched at his stubble and didn't respond. Severus steadied himself; at this point, there was very little Sirius could do for Severus to

leave him. “Sirius, I’m not leaving you. We’ve passed that point, truly. So be honest with me.”

Sirius looked away, lines harsh on his face. He was silent for a moment and let out a punishing laugh. “Merlin, we’re the same, aren’t we? So, Severus, how about this? If you think you don’t deserve love, then how the fuck do you think I feel sometimes?” He breathed harshly, and Severus stared at him with wide eyes. It worried him that Sirius could carry his hatred around and yet act as he did.

But then he thought about how the people who hurt the most typically knew the best ways to hide it.

“I left you with that man. I didn’t do anything for a week,” Sirius continued.

“You couldn’t have known,” Severus comforted quietly. “And you came for me,” he continued, “Which is what matters.”

Sirius ran a hand over his face. “Okay, then how about this? I pretend nothing’s wrong. Nothing. And I don’t tell you things I should. Things I owe you.”

“Like what?

Sirius stood and retraced Severus’s steps. “Like I-,” he started, before breaking off suddenly. He swallowed hard, discomfort tearing across his face. “Like I hate myself.”

“Sirius, I-,” Severus interjected, thinking back to their earlier conversations where he realized Sirius did not possess nearly as much confidence as Severus had tended to believe.

“No. Like I *hate* myself. And there’s this thing inside me that’s broken and wrong, but really that’s just me, and you know how many times I have panic attacks? Or how many times I can barely pull myself from my head? Or how long I beat myself up for how I act, for pretending who I’m still who I used to be, for pretending that I’m Sirius fucking Black and not the fuck up I am, this piece of shit excuse of a person who killed his best friend and who-.”

Severus cut him off by standing up and pulling him in a tight hug. Sirius heaved against him, head pressing into the side of Severus’s. They stood silently for a long time as Sirius breathed haggardly against him, hands gripping tight at his back. Severus waited and then when he felt like it was appropriate, he pulled away and pressed a line of kisses along Sirius’s jaw.

“I’m sorry,” Sirius whispered brokenly. “I went outside today. I shouldn’t have done that. It was too cold.”

Severus shushed him and stroked his hair. “It’s okay. I know.”

Sirius fell still. “I’m sorry,” he apologized again, “You’re already so stressed-.”

“Sirius,” Severus cut in severely. “You’re the most important thing in my life. I will always be here for you. So there is no need for apologies.”

“Still,” Sirius protested weakly, and Severus pulled away to stare hard at him before his gaze softened. He ran his hands down his arms and took a minute to collect his thoughts.

“I’m not like you Sirius. I don’t comfort others easily. But if you think that about yourself, then you know I think the same, and if you think I’m worth anything, then you are worth the same. I’m here for you, Sirius. I’m here and I think-.”

“What?” Sirius asked, a note of panic in his voice when Severus cut off.

“I won’t be enough for this,” Severus admitted, and Sirius’s gaze instantly shuttered.

“Oh,” he said, and Severus shook his head.

“Not like that,” he paused and wetted his lips. “I have a past student, a brilliant girl, who’s a Mind Healer now.”

“A shrink?” Sirius asked, frowning. “Yeah, so should I just stroll up and ask if she takes fugitives with serious mental issues, Sev?” He said, a hint of cruelty in his voice, and Severus shook his head again.

“Yes. She’ll understand. She’s…you would like her really. Very disparaging of the Ministry. Loves to read. And she wouldn’t turn you away or tell anyone. She thinks very highly of me, for whatever reason, so she’ll…” Sirius stared at him, but Severus couldn’t read anything behind the blankness in his eyes. “Meet at her least. Sirius, you understand I…I love you. I want you…”

Sirius stared at him warily. “Do you have a therapist?”

Severus shook his head. “No, and I have probably suffered much more than I would have.”

Sirius fell silent. “I’ll think about it,” he said quietly and turned away. “Any chance we can forget about this for the rest of tonight and I’ll just play the piano?”

Severus thought for a moment and then agreed. His headache had worsened, and he had done what he could. He wished he could do more to comfort Sirius and say the words that would heal him. He knew it didn’t work like that. It could only come from within Sirius, and Severus, with the war worsening around him, could not get him to that point.

Sirius gave him a tired smile, the bitterness lost from his expression. They walked down in silence, and the night eventually devolved into the sounds of Mozart. Nothing was okay, but it was better than before.

Before they fell asleep, wrapped tightly around each other, Sirius whispered that he would go the therapist, that he thought he wasn’t well, he did need help, and he loved Severus.

And then they were asleep, the first notes of *Moonlight Sonata* repeating softly in their minds.

Chapter End Notes

Tom Odell and Keaton Henson are two artists I love for this story. Also a bit of Foals for the angst and some Lord Huron for the hope. Have a thought to create a playlist for this story so if you have any songs that you think work really well, please let me know - I think we've gone far past the point where this story entails a musical accompaniment.

Spring

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Time started to pass quickly for Severus as January fell into February and February rushed towards March. Severus barely noticed the days pass; the Dark Lord had increased his demand for potions, and the extra work significantly burdened him. Between that and class, he barely had time to focus on the date, regardless of the fact that it would change anyway.

Fortunately, besides the extra work, the Dark Lord had mostly stopped paying attention to Severus. The edited reports from Potter's Occulmency lessons appeased him, and with the return of the freed Death Eaters, the Dark Lord had other interests than tormenting Severus.

Severus could fade into the background and escape most nights unscathed. As long as he continued to produce potions before the deadlines, he remained uninjured. And while he had to work long nights with increasing frequency, he had started to sneak Sirius into his rooms, well-aware of the risk but unwilling to fully confront it. Besides, it's not like he ever had visitors, to begin with, and Umbridge generally avoided the creep of the dungeons.

While Severus still treasured when Sirius serenaded him in piano notes, he started to enjoy those nights in his lab– the moments of Sirius asking question after question, of the clever potion-making tricks that caused Sirius to look at him with childish glee, the soft fuming of potions in the dark dungeons that felt impossibly warm with Sirius watching him with dark eyes.

He didn't really think he could ask for more.

For the rest of it, he kept himself moving. He missed Albus, missed losing that sense of safety, but he did what he could in his absence. In this case, it meant protecting the Slytherins from Umbridge's increasingly draconian measures and doing what he could to subtly wreak havoc on her plans.

It kept him busy, and fortunately so because he could not afford to stop during the war - to do so meant he wouldn't start again and with a role as pivotal as his, it wasn't an option.

He could only afford to slow down with Sirius. After their difficult winter, they had managed to reclaim a comfortable and not nearly as emotionally draining routine. Sirius read and played the piano, and Severus graded and researched, and they kissed and talked, and it made them feel loved.

They had left most of what happened this past winter buried, which, while probably not ideal, Severus believed they both desperately needed. It was one thing to bare your heart, but another to constantly rehash those conversations. To not to ignore, but rather lay to rest, what had been said and seen was greatly needed for the two of them. There was comfort in normalcy and in pretending the scars they carried didn't define them.

Of course, nothing could remain completely buried. Sirius had asked him about his scars one night, and Severus had explained no, he didn't understand why he had done that, but that what Sirius had done was an expression of love he had never imagined possible. Then Sirius had asked him about a few of the scars, and Severus explained and then had he had asked about a few of Sirius's, and it lifted some weight from the two of them.

Severus asked him about the therapy, which Sirius had started shortly after that night. He knew the woman, Cassandra, from Hogwarts and had always liked her. She was a passionate student and brilliant, keen on psychology. He worried how the situation would pan out initially, but just as he expected, Sirius had taken an immediate liking to her too and didn't raise any further protests.

Indeed, the therapy seemed to help. It showed in small things, but the fact that Sirius's smiles came easier and his eyes didn't hold their usual weight – Severus considered them victories.

And while initially, Sirius had seemed uncertain of Cassandra, he quickly started to speak of her many positives – notwithstanding the fact that her boyfriend led an activist group against the inhumane conditions of the Wizarding criminal system.

Severus cursed himself for not doing so earlier; he should have known better and done more to help. One didn't survive Azkaban unscathed, and dubious mental health was hardly far-fetched. However, he had done what he could, had done what he had known, and for everything, it was better late than never.

Sirius's mental health had yet to come up again in great detail. From what Severus could gather, it was a mesh of PTSD and panic disorder, which was not so far from himself either. Navigating the pitfalls of mental illness proved difficult and wearing, and it solaced Severus to know that Sirius had someone to talk to who could provide the support and advice that Severus couldn't.

However, Severus suffered no delusions that the matter was laid to rest. A key facet of their relationship lay in their ability to listen and support and comfort, and conversation would certainly drift towards that topic again. Just as they were sure to talk about James and Lily and Azkaban and their childhoods and everything else they had lived through. But, for the time being, an unspoken agreement lay between them that those conversations, unless absolutely unnecessary, would be best left for after the war.

For after the war, they would have the stability and peace to actually cope and process their trauma. They wouldn't have to hide or worry that each night could be their last or that each day threatened a turn for the worst.

Severus hoped it would be soon. Desperately *needed* it to be soon. Every day held the possibility that today could be the day he lost Sirius. Or that the Dark Lord would see through his lies and torture him into insanity. Or some other irreparable shift would occur that would break them apart and destroy all that they had created night after night.

It made it hard to breathe sometimes, and so he let the days pass and pulled at his hair in frustration. He memorized the feel and scent of Sirius, the softness of his hair, the firmness of his arms, the lines inked into his skin, the sound of his laugh, the glint in his eyes when he smiled, the image of him lost in a book and when he was coming and when he smiled and laughed and when he breathed.

He felt that Sirius did the same, and since they both shared in that cloying fear, it only drove them closer together out of desperation and fragile hope.

That was all Severus really had – that fragile hope that they would both survive the war and create a new life. He didn't believe in God, not after what he had seen and what had been done to him, but he would cast his thoughts out late at night and beg Him to give him that one thing. He reasoned he had already suffered so much that surely he was owed something good and that please, *please* let that be Sirius.

He thought Sirius did the same some nights, and for a reason unknown to him, the thought of it made him want to cry.

But he didn't and they continued one day at a time, taking what they could and hoping for more.

Sirius thumbed through his copy of *Romeo and Juliet* and decided to read *Macbeth* next. Then maybe *Merchant of Venice* after. Or *Othello.* Every so often, Shakespeare would sweep him up, and he would read play after play until the desire waned. Shakespeare was his first foray into Muggle literature and would always hold a special place in his heart.

He lost himself in the dialogue, only glancing up when he heard the familiar sound of Severus appearing in his room. Sirius glanced up, a smile already on his face. It faltered when he saw Severus's scowl and the tension radiating from his shoulders.

"Hey, baby, what's wrong?" Sirius asked, placing the book aside. His mind flickered through all the possible reasons; he decided to place his bets on Harry and their ongoing Occulmency lessons.

"Potter," Severus snarled, collapsing into his chair. He sat stiffly and rubbed at his temple.

"What did he do?" Sirius asked, leaning forward and placing a hand on Severus's knee. Severus glanced down but didn't move.

"He-," Severus began, spitting out the word before turning away. "I've decided to end our lessons."

"Sev…" Sirius protested, but a look from Severus silenced him.

"Don't question my decision, Sirius," Severus hissed, and Sirius regarded the man. He didn't want to fight, not over this. Even if he thought Harry really did need those lessons.

"I'm not," Sirius corrected. "I'm just wondering what happened."

Severus's scowl deepened and he furrowed his eyebrows. "Nothing." Sirius waited, and Severus sighed, some of the tension leaking out of him. "He turned legilimens against me. Which, more or less, was what I was hoping he would learn. So I'm done with him. My teaching expertise has been utilized," he said scathingly, and Sirius winced.

"That means…did he see anything?" Sirius asked, finally understanding the root of Severus's anger.

Severus sulked, crossing his arms and staring heatedly at Sirius. Sirius used every ounce of his will not to look away. "Yes. A few throwaway memories of my childhood."

"Anything important?"

Severus shifted his shoulders, and his fingers dug into his forearm. "My father yelling at my mother. My failure at Quidditch. Throwaways. And…" he added after a moment. Sirius waited, squeezing Severus's knee. "He looked in my pensive," his voice curled in hatred. "And he saw a memory from the end of our fifth year. When I called Lily a, um, do you even remember that?"

Sirius thought for a moment and nodded. They had corned Severus, bullied him in front of others, Lily had stepped him, and Severus had called her a Mudblood. And then past that, they

stopped being friends. “Yeah, I do. That’s why…?” he asked gently, and the lines on Severus’s face deepened.

“The straw that broke the camels’ back, but yes. And Potter saw it so that was lovely,” Severus spat, lips curling.

“But he doesn’t know about…?” Sirius cast his mind back, but no one ever really talked about Severus and Lily. It seemed to be a relationship they had all forgotten. Funny how so utterly significant that one relationship happened to be.

“No, as far as I know.” Severus closed his eyes and rubbed his face. Sirius looked at him in concern; he seemed to be in pain.

“Are you hurting?” Sirius asked quietly, and Severus opened one eye to peer at him.

“Headache,” he grumbled. Sirius tensed at the word and hoped Severus didn’t notice. After Molly, Albus, and he had discussed the alternate personalities, they had decided to respect the Agonized’s wishes and deal with it after the war. Still, the idea of it made Sirius uneasy.

“You just want to go to sleep then?” Sirius asked. He wasn’t tired, but he figured he could read while Severus cuddled against him.

Severus thought for a moment and then nodded. He moved to stand up and paused. “You don’t think that’s wrong?” he asked hesitantly, and Sirius tilted his head in confusion.

“What is?”

“Not teaching Potter anymore.”

“No, I don’t. Not for you. You’re already doing so much.”

Shame filled Severus’s face and he glanced away. “But the war…and Potter…”

“I’ll talk to Remus. I’m sure we can figure out another way for Harry to learn. Or at least to continue to practice. But hey, if he was also able to do that to you, one of the greatest occulmens currently living, then you might have accomplished exactly what Albus wanted.”

Severus sighed, his face softening. He relaxed his shoulders and after a moment, got himself ready for bed. He had taken to wearing Sirius’s clothes, which Sirius loved an inordinate amount. Tonight he had thrown on a faded blue t-shirt.

He yawned and grimaced, rubbing at his temple again, before climbing into bed. Sirius followed, turning off all the lights, excluding his bedside lamp, with a flick of his wand. He propped the pillows up and allowed Severus to cuddle against his waist. Severus looped an arm over, forehead pressing into Sirius’s side, and Sirius reached down to stroke a hand through his hair.

Severus let out a soft sound, looping one leg over Sirius’s. Sirius smiled and continued to stroke Severus’s hair and face and upper back. He used his other hand to prop open his book and began to read.

He had never really liked *Romeo and Juliet*, he found it far too contrived and ridiculous, especially when people lauded it as Shakespeare’s greatest. But despite that, there were still passages that caught his breath and rested deep inside his chest. And the idea of star-crossed love, for all its clichés, still allured, and he spared a thought for a teenage him and Severus- a story he

thought would fall into those clichés as the Gryffindor and Slytherin fell in love with each other despite the war raging around them.

It would be a good story, he thought, as long as it didn’t end in death.

Eventually, Severus fell asleep beside him, breath gentle and warm. Sirius read until he tired and then turned off the light and shifted himself down. He pulled Severus’s head into his shoulder and pressed a gentle kiss against his forehead before he closed his eyes and let sleep claim him.

Chapter End Notes

We're nearing the end here and want to thank all of you for sticking so far with it. It'll be sad when it ends as this really started something special for me as I quickly fell into writing far too much about these two fools. And still, at this point, can't seem to get enough of them...have far too many stories planned and not nearly enough time.

Sinner

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sirius awoke with a start. His mind struggled to dislodge from a dream, so it took him a moment to notice that Severus no longer lay beside him.

He jolted up, glancing frantically around the room, and let out an audible sigh of relief when he saw his lover pacing the room.

However, concern immediately dispelled the relief as he made out Severus in the darkness. He had crunched over, hands wringing in front of him. He walked with jerky, half-measured steps, taking the turns too quickly as he paced.

Sirius's stomach sunk. With a shaky hand, he reached over to flick on the light. When he did, Severus jolted to a stop, hands still fidgeting in front of him, head bent down, and lips moving as if to whisper to himself.

"Severus?" Sirius asked, clearing his throat. He sounded far too loud in the quiet of the night. Severus didn't respond. "Or um," Sirius tried, licking his lips. "Someone else?" he asked weakly, and Severus twitched. "If so, I'm Sirius."

"I know who you are," the man said almost breathlessly. "I love you, Severus loves you," he said quickly, the syllables falling out of his mouth like raindrops in a torrential downpour.

Sirius set himself against the rush of panic and focused on the man in front of him. "Who are you?" he asked slowly. The man laughed, high and hard.

"You know me. Think, think, *think*. I'm not the child," he continued, not giving Sirius a chance to respond. "I'm not the Teenager. I'm not the Agonized, bless him. So I can be the Sinner or the Heartbroken. Who do I think I am, my love? My puppy? My darling sweetheart?"

"The Heartbroken," Sirius affirmed, and the Heartbroken's broken laugh confirmed it. "It's nice to meet you," he said to fill the following silence.

"Is it? Do you think it is? Do you know what will happen to me when I lose you? Will you die on me? Like Lily did? Will you do that to me?" the Heartbroken's voice rose at each question until he was nearly shouting, and Sirius flinched at the words.

Sirius shook his head against the onslaught of questions and focused himself. The Heartbroken spoke far too fast as if one moment to catch his breath would cause him to break down.

"See, Sirius, darling, star of my life, I think you will. You almost certainly will. Severus is never all that lucky when it comes to love. Which is why he has me so his heart breaks but doesn't shatter." The Heartbroken had started to pace against, every movement jerky and uncertain. "Do you know what I mean? You've loved before. You've lost before. James Potter broke your heart."

"Yes, he did," Sirius agreed quietly, his mouth suddenly dry. He felt like a shipwrecked sailor lost in a tumultuous sea. "What can I do to help?"

The Heartbroken stumbled. "Help me?" he said surprised and then laughed. Sirius flinched

again at the sound of it. “Not much besides not break Severus’s heart. But sometimes you don’t have any choice in that matter, do you? You could die today or tomorrow or get sick of him or let that Voice in your head dictate what you do.”

Sirius froze and breathed in raggedly. “How do you know about that?”

“The Sinner realized. Those pesky dementors, huh? Didn’t just have to almost steal your soul but also leave you with that lovely parting gift. The Sinner loves it, thinks it’s delightful. If they couldn’t kiss you outright, they were going to find other ways to destroy your soul. The Sinner wants to talk to you about it. But I don’t want him to, not yet. He’s not a very good person, and I don’t want Severus to lose you over him.”

Sirius caught a glimpse of the Heartbroken’s face, and the differences lay stark against it. The Heartbroken’s eyes darted around as if one moment of lost distraction would cause him to reflect what he must carry inside. When he fell silent, his lips continued to form words, lost in an endless stream of consciousness.

“Okay,” Sirius said, mainly to steady himself. “That’s fine. The Agonized said we shouldn’t figure this out until after the war.”

The Heartbroken nodded. “Yes, yes, good. Listen to him,” he paused, thinking for a moment as his mouth continued to form words. Then a thought struck him and he spoke frantically. “And no, no, no, no, no, don’t say anything to Severus. He really shouldn’t know, not yet because think of what it will do to him? And in a war like this and with the Dark Lord and with the idea of losing you and no, no, no, no, no, you mustn’t. The pain still hurts too much, will always hurt until this truly ends.” The Heartbroken gasped and grabbed at his chest, “but when it does, please do something. Please, please, for our sakes. It hurts and hurts, especially for the Agonized who is the best of us, but we love Severus and we’ll do anything for him even if it means to carry his pain and exist, exist like this.”

“Yes, I-understand,” Sirius stuttered out, but the Heartbroken continued.

“It was good, what you did to him when he showed you the scars. It helped and the Agonized wasn’t in so much the pain, and the Child was able to sleep, and the Teenager smiled, and it was good, so thank you, thank you for that,” the Heartbroken gestured with his hands as he paced, the actions brief and sudden. “It was the Sinner’s idea; the others were not doing so well, the war is so hard on us, but it helped, gave them some solace and comfort amongst everything.”

“The Sinner did that?” Sirius asked, trying to muffle his surprise and not think of the implications. The Heartbroken startled and stopped to look at him, pupils blown and eyes wide.

“Yes, of course, he’s not a good man, but he does what’s necessary to protect Severus and to help us. And so he plants suggestions, places some pressure, which is why Severus was so open with you in the beginning. Don’t look at me like that. He never talks to anyone like that, even Molly who the Child and Teenager adore.

“But the Sinner saw something in you, and I was so worried at first because I would be the one hurt if you were what the Agonized thought you were, the evil childhood bully, but you weren’t. The Sinner was right, there was something more to you. Azkaban was good for you for that because you stopped being the monster you were and became something kind and loving and good for Severus because like him you knew pain and you knew loss and the Sinner saw that in you, even though none of us saw it at first, but we all see it now and care deeply about you for it.”

Sirius reeled at the words. His mouth worked to form some sound, but it failed, and he

stared speechlessly. The Heartbroken paused for a moment, pulling at his hands, and then resumed his pace.

"The Sinner wants to talk with you now. He doesn't like me very much, you see, because I talk too much and the pain I carry isn't like the others, but I think it's important because I carry the pain from all the best parts of Severus's life, of Lily and his mother. And please don't let me carry yours. Promise me that, Sirius Black, my love, my puppy, my wonderful man," the Heartbroken begged raggedly.

Sirius nodded. "I promise," he whispered hoarsely, and the Heartbroken nodded.

"Goodbye, Sirius Black, I hope to see you again after the war." And with that, he closed his eyes, waited a few moments, and then the nervous energy eased from his body and Sirius was left with a very different man.

Sirius knew without a doubt that the man in front of him had to be the Sinner; it certainly wasn't Severus.

The Sinner exuded cold confidence and power. A smirk now rested on his face, head tilted to the side in cruel amusement. Every movement spoke of control, the expression on his face screamed of superiority. Sirius could only imagine Severus turning into someone like this if he lacked the kindness and compassion that had somehow managed to root itself deep within him.

"Hello Sirius," the Sinner said, speaking slowly and pronouncing each syllable with a soft lilt. It contrasted sharply with the Heartbroken, and Sirius's mind struggled to piece them together. "It's a pleasure to finally talk with you."

Sirius swallowed hard and nodded. The Sinner reminded him of Voldemort in a way, commanding and merciless and knowing in his dominance. "Same with you," he said because it seemed appropriate. The Sinner regarded him, shadows hiding most of his features. Sirius waited as his breath caught in his throat.

The Sinner stood a moment longer, eyes traveling over Sirius, and then crossed the room to sit beside him on the bed, feet resting on the floor as he twisted to face him. Sirius finally caught sight of his eyes, and the person behind them terrified him.

"I'm sure you have questions," the Sinner said quietly, lips twitching upwards. He blinked slowly, and his gaze unnerved Sirius.

Sirius coughed and found his voice. "Uh, yes I do. You-." The Sinner tilted his head and gazed at Sirius curiously. "What are you?" Sirius finally asked, throat tightening. He swallowed in discomfort.

The Sinner simply stared at Sirius, and then his gaze focused as if he had started to look at something behind Sirius. "May I talk with it?" the Sinner asked, ignoring Sirius. Sirius felt a spike of fear and averted his gaze.

Tell him I say hello.

Please go away.

No. This is interesting.

"It says hello," Sirius muttered weakly, feeling stuck between two very dangerous forces.

The Sinner closed his eyes and smiled.

Ask him what he wants.

"It wants to know what you want."

"I feel like that's been abundantly clear," the Sinner said, frowning. However, that cold amusement never left his face, as if he knew a joke that no one would or could understand.

"To protect Severus," Sirius clarified, and the Sinner smiled again and nodded.

"Of course. Now, the better question is what does *it* want?"

Sirius froze and waited desperately for the black voice to coat his mind. It took several heartbeats for the black voice to respond.

Not that.

"Not that," Sirius repeated, and the Sinner chuckled, the sound low and deep.

What do you think I want?

Sirius repeated the phrase, and the Sinner didn't respond for a long moment, instead staring intently at Sirius.

"It makes no difference," the Sinner said, and Sirius wanted to scream that of course it did, this voice tormented him and of course it made a difference. The black voice chuckled before falling quiet when the Sinner began to speak. "Sirius, I notice your distress," he said slowly, closing his eyes. "Please do not feel so."

Sirius wanted to laugh and scream, but he managed to pull himself together. "How can I not be?" he demanded. The Sinner shushed him.

"Because the Voices and my desires are contrary and most likely conflicting. Which means it can no longer continue to exist if it seeks to drive you away from Severus."

Amusing. You'll never be rid of me.

"It says you can't get rid of it," Sirius whispered. The Sinner's expression conveyed his skepticism.

"I didn't take it for a fool to dismiss me."

He's speaking nonsense.

You are mine.

"I'm not," the Sinner responded without any prompting from Sirius, and Sirius froze and felt the black voice get very quiet. "And you are Severus's, if anyones. Which, following that line of logic, means you are mine."

"Can you-?" Sirius asked hesitantly, glancing up at the Sinner with hope. The Sinner looked at him with concern.

"Not now. But I will. Rest assured," the Sinner said with easy confidence, and Sirius

couldn't help but believe him.

"Thank you," he murmured, and the Sinner stretched out one arm to cross him so that he now partly leaned over Sirius. He brought his face closer, so Sirius couldn't see much past it.

"They doubted me initially," the Sinner began, his voice dropping. "Not Sirius Black, they said. Too much past pain. A monster, truly, with what he had done to Severus." Sirius flinched at the word, and the Sinner smiled. "I saw differently. A monster, perhaps, but one with a soul that could understand Severus. I was not wrong, was I?" he asked, and Sirius shook his head. "The Heartbroken frets over it. Expects we will lose you like we have lost the others. That may be so."

Sirius began to protest, but a look from the Sinner quieted him.

"That may be so. I cannot tell the future. If so, we will protect Severus as we always have. But I doubt he will live much longer if he is to lose you. He has always thought he wanted death, but I suppose after losing you, he will truly mean it. And I do not believe we will protect him from that this time." The Sinner grew quiet and reflective, his eyes never leaving Sirius's face. Sirius did his best to meet them as the words washed over him.

"You-," Sirius tried, questions overwhelming him. The Sinner reached out and stroked Sirius's cheek. His hands were cold, much colder than Severus's usually were, and he repressed the urge to flinch away.

"We were created by his mother," the Sinner explained slowly, words soft and almost lost in the night. "She used almost all of her magic to do so. But something happened to the Child that would have destroyed what you value inside of Severus and deprived him of a life, and so she made the sacrifice." The Sinner paused, eyes flickering with past memories. "We emerged throughout the years depending on what he needed. The Child at the beginning, the Agonized shortly after. The Heartbroken when his mother died. The Teenager when the men raped him. Me a year later. We will be with him until he dies, and our only hope is that the pain ends and that he may one day meet us. But not until I judge appropriate."

Sirius reeled at the words, transfixed by the Sinner's light smile. "Anything else?" the Sinner asked, the words lilting.

Sirius opened his mouth and closed it when a thought struck him. "Why don't you kill Voldemort then?" he asked quickly, uncertain if the Sinner would anger. "He's caused Severus the greatest amount of pain."

The Sinner tilted his head and smiled, brushing Sirius's cheek with his thumb. "One cannot kill its creator." Sirius nodded, swallowing hard. The Sinner watched him for many heartbeats, and Sirius shifted under his intense gaze. His attention turned inward for a moment, and he said, "I must go. The Child has begun to cry. Very well, Sirius Black. Do not make me come after you." The Sinner chuckled, but Sirius couldn't tell if he intended it as a joke. "And do not continue to listen to the Voice. It will have no power over you shortly."

"I won't," Sirius responded weakly, and the Sinner closed his eyes, his body going slack a moment later and collapsing onto Sirius. Sirius waited, expecting another person to take control of Severus, but the man remained asleep.

Sirius pulled Severus's legs up and readjusted him to make him comfortable. He then sat for a long time, processing and thinking over the Heartbroken's and the Sinner's words. It had brought some clarity but still left many questions and far too many implications. Unfortunately, the black voice seemed determined to intrude.

Idiot.

What?

The Sinner.

He's not-

I am a part of you, Sirius.

He will never rid you of me.

But-

Don't be ridiculous. Severus cannot save you.

It's not Severus. It's the Sinner.

And you seem to be pretty damned scared of him.

Only because he frightens you.

Maybe. But he does scare you.

No.

Yes, yes, he does. Which means he can do what he threatens.

No. He cannot.

Yes. Yes, he can.

You have no power over me then? You are nothing.

Not when he will destroy you.

I can and will break your mind.

I will drive you insane.

You will wish you were back in Azkaban.

I have ALL THE POWER.

I'm not so sure that's true anymore.

SIRIUS BLACK YOU

No. Go away.

"Sirius?" Severus asked sleepily, and Sirius jolted from his thoughts. He felt winded, and he winced at the sudden headache. He almost couldn't believe what had happened, but the Sinner had empowered him and suddenly that black voice did not seem so powerful and all-encompassing anymore. Not in the face of something significantly more powerful and terrifying. "Sirius?" Severus tried again, voice slightly more aware. "Is everything okay?" he mumbled.

Sirius took a long moment to reply, and it felt like his heart beat far too fast. “Yes,” he responded. “Yes, I am. I love you.”

Severus raised his head and frowned. “You-,” he began, but Sirius cut him off. He felt much too overwhelmed to make sense of any of what had happened. He only knew that Severus was okay, which for now, felt like more than enough.

“I’m okay,” Sirius assured. “Weird dream. But it’s okay now. Go back to sleep, my love.”

Severus sighed against him and closed his eyes again, falling back into sleep’s embrace. Sirius stayed up for another few hours, mind racing as he thought over the Heartbroken and the Sinner and the voice and everything else. Eventually, he felt he had made enough sense of it for now and that he would talk with Molly and Albus and they would do what they all could to help and protect Severus. The thought made him feel secure and gave him purpose and finally, he closed his eyes and let his mind give way to better dreams.

And the whole time, despite everything, the black voice remained silent, and Sirius couldn’t help but feel like he had scored an important victory.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you! Crazy to think there's only three chapters left of this story...

If you feel like there might be a Severus/Sirius sized gap in your life after this concludes, I have a few other stories with them and I'd be happy to rec other stories - one in particular is called Second Life by Cassandra7 and nwhiker, which I highly recommend. I've read far too much fanfic about these two to be healthy, if we're honest about it.

Clearing

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Get dressed," Severus ordered, throwing a T-shirt in Sirius' direction. He stood naked, hands on his hips, and Sirius took a moment to admire him, arousal already coiling in his stomach despite finishing another bout of sex.

"Huh? Why?" Sirius asked, content to spend the rest of the day naked and in bed. He had even opened both his windows, and a warm April breeze fluttered through the room.

"Because I want to take you somewhere," Severus continued, pulling on a pair of boxers and Sirius's jeans. They hung low on his hips, and Sirius licked his lips at the sight. Severus noticed and scowled.

"Polyjuice?" Sirius asked. After using up his Christmas gift, he had earnestly convinced Severus to brew another batch. They had been going on a few small day trips together, venturing out into usually deserted areas where Sirius finally felt he could breathe again and he could often cajole Severus into holding hands.

Severus shook his head. "No, not this time." He buttoned up one of his white shirts and rolled his eyes at Sirius's appraising look. "Don't look at me like that. Get out of bed, let's go."

Sirius sighed and obliged, pulling on his clothes. "Where are we off to then?' he asked, grabbing his wand. Severus didn't answer, so Sirius let it rest. He would find out soon enough, and he would trust Severus to take him to hell and back.

When they both finished getting ready, Severus gripped Sirius's forearm and with a tug of their stomach, apparated away.

Sirius blinked and took in his surroundings. They had apparated to a small clearing surrounded by a thick covering of trees. In fact, Sirius couldn't find a way in or out through the vegetation. It felt isolated, and Sirius wondered how Severus had found this place.

He swept his gaze around the rest of the clearing and stilled when he turned to see a small, pristine pond. Lilli pads spotted the surface and turtles lounged on a broken log. Birds chirped, a sign of spring, and a gentle breeze gently ruffled the leaves. Tree branches shaded over the pond, creating a perfect scene of a spring afternoon – one that could easily be translated into an idyllic painting.

"What is this place?" Sirius asked, turning back to Severus who offered a small smile.

"It's…it's close to where I live. Lived. As a child." Severus paused and pushed onwards. "I don't remember when I found it, but it's always been a sanctuary. When things got…I would come here with Lily, years and years ago."

"Oh, oh, Sev," Sirius said, stepping forward to pull his lover into a light embrace. "It's beautiful here."

Severus huffed out a laugh and melted into his hug. "Ah, yes, and nearly impossible to find if you weren't a skinny, malnourished child."

Sirius smiled against his temple and ran his hands down Severus's back. "It's lovely."

Severus nodded against him and then tensed, pulling away. He ran his hands down his front and frowned. “I thought we could have a picnic. If you don’t mind.”

“Oh, yes, how dare you to assume I want to spend time with my lover on a beautiful spring afternoon? And to have a picnic and enjoy each other’s company? You’re out of your mind.”

Severus scowled and muttered the jelly leg curse. Sirius flipped him off as he fell over. Severus followed him down shortly after, unfurling a blanket and making a picnic basket appear out of thin air. He unpacked it with steady fingers, and Sirius watched, enraptured. He loved those hands, he thought. They had given more than he could have ever imagined. And they were marvelous in bed.

Severus set up an array of cheese and grapes and pulled out a bottle of red wine, and Sirius smiled brightly, leaning forward to press a long kiss against Severus’s mouth. Severus sighed against it, and then pushed Sirius away, uncorking the wine and pouring out two glasses.

He handed a glass of wine to Sirius, and they talked comfortably about the book Sirius was currently reading (*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn).* Severus mentioned how he supposed James Potter and Tom Sawyer would have gotten along well. Sirius figured that would make him Huck, a thought he greatly enjoyed.

They then moved onto Severus’s potions for the twins, which then caused Severus to start to identify the flowers scattered around them and their significance and use in potions. The wine made Sirius tipsy and content.

When they finished the food, Sirius reached out to pull Severus against him. They lay down, Severus’s nose pressed into the crook of Sirius’s neck, and their bodies aligned, ankles crossed. Sirius started to lazily pet Severus’s hair and shoulders, and the man relaxed against him, crossing an arm over to rest heavily on his stomach.

They didn’t talk for a while as no need existed. The sun beamed down on them and caressed them like lovers. Sirius could feel himself start to doze off, happier and freer than he had felt in a while.

He never wanted this afternoon to end. He dreaded the thought of returning to Grimmauld Palace. He only wanted this moment in the April sunshine to continue onwards until the world beyond the trees faded away and only he and Severus remained.

He reveled in the thought, and as he did, something drove him to speak.

“I’ve been thinking,” he said quietly, and Severus pulled up beside him, resting his chin on Sirius’s chest to look at him. “About after the war,” Sirius continued, even though the topic was one they rarely, if ever, breached. It held the massive contingency that they would survive whatever the upcoming months and years held for them, and until then, there was no use thinking past that.

“Yes?” Severus asked just as quietly.

“I’ve been talking with Cass. She’s wonderful, you know.”

“I do.” Severus settled himself more comfortably against Sirius.

“Her boyfriend works with an organization that’s trying to reform the criminal justice system at the Wizengamot. To make it more humane.” Sirius paused, his voice growing thick even though the words shouldn’t have made him emotional. “I think I want to do that for a bit. Afterwards.”

Severus remained silent for a long beat, his slender fingers tracing patterns on Sirius’s chest. “You should,” he finally said. “You…that would…yes, Sirius, that would be wonderful.”

Sirius let out a breath he didn't realize he'd been holding. He hadn't realized how badly he needed for Severus's approval, but it felt far more plausible now. Cass had said that once they cleared him, he could join, that they did great work, and that they would love having Sirius. And Sirius wanted that. Badly. If only to fuck over his overseers at Azkaban, if nothing else. And to prevent what had happened to him from happening to anyone else.

"What about you?" he asked carefully, unsure if he should press Severus on this point. The man skittered around topics like this, but pressed against his lover in the clearing, the war felt distant. Here, the future could be certain.

"Ah, I suppose I'll continue to teach. Work on my research. Travel a bit, I suppose," Severus said, his voice subdued. Sirius figured it would be as good of a response as he could expect.

"Where?"

"Mhmm?"

"Where do you want to go?" Sirius's mind flashed to all the places he had always hoped he would travel to until he lay on a barren rock for twelve years. He figured he could delay working on prison reform and travel with Severus for a bit. It would be good to get away.

"Oh, I don't know," Severus shrugged. "I would…I went once with Albus to Prague, and it was lovely. I think I would like to take you there."

"Prague?" Sirius repeated, the word feeling wonderful on his lips. It tasted of a future and of peace.

"Yes, the Muggles have referred to it as a city of magic, and I wouldn't disagree," Severus continued, bringing one leg over Sirius's.

"Then we'll go. Prague. Huh, I like that."

"What about you?" Severus murmured, sounding sleepy. Sirius thought for a moment.

"America," he declared and saw Severus grimace. "What? What do you have against America?"

Severus sniffed. "All very…loud. And macho. It's unnecessary." Sirius laughed at that.

"We'll go to the Southwest. I've always wanted to see the Grand Canyon. And California. James and I had plans to go there one day, but I'll settle for you," he said, his tone teasing and light, and Severus huffed.

"Fine," he said after a moment. "Prague and…America," his lips curled at the last word, and Sirius laughed.

"You'll love it. We'll have an amazing time. All those hot cowboys," he joked, and he could practically feel Severus roll his eyes. "Think that would be nice," he continued subdued. "I do hope we both make it, you know? I think I would…" Sirius forced, the back of his throat aching. "I think it would be nice to have a life together. One we don't have to hide. One where we could…"

"I know," Severus whispered, but he didn't say anything more, and they eventually settled back into silence. The sun sank lower in the sky, and Sirius held Severus close, running his hands up and down his back. He allowed himself to imagine a life after the war. A life watching Severus grow old and even more grumpy, of travel and passionate work and amazing sex and a partner who understood and loved him, who made him feel safe and loved and who despite everything – their bitter rivalry, their years of pain and grief after losing the people they loved most in the world, the

simmering rage and biting remarks – who despite it all, had found each other.

He would marry the man, he thought. In Prague, he would propose. And if Severus said yes, which Sirius desperately hoped for, they would have a small wedding with Harry and Remus and Molly. Albus would walk Severus down the aisle, and Sirius would hardly be able to look at him without crying.

Then they would create the lives they had never thought they deserved. They would fight and have their problems, but Sirius found strength in his belief that they would one day end up together old and gray and with aching joints and bad backs. He let that image linger in his mind.

“What are you thinking of?” Severus asked gently, and Sirius smiled, pressing a kiss against the top of Severus’s head.

“How much I love you,” he murmured, and Severus didn’t speak for a long moment.

When he finally spoke, his voice was low and rough, and his grip tightened on Sirius’s side. “Funny, I was thinking the same,” he whispered.

“We’re getting a life after this,” he assured, his voice suddenly sounding far too loud in the quiet clearing. The certainty rang out, and he felt overwhelmed by the steely desire to do just that. “One that we deserve. One without Azkaban or Voldemort or anything else. One where we - we have each other.”

He stroked his fingers through Severus’s hair and waited, his body tensing with the driving urge to spring up and hunt down anyone who threatened that future. Severus’s breath tickled his neck, and he wished he could see the man’s face. He knew the look in his eyes would blow him away.

“Yes,” Severus murmured thickly. “Yes, I would like that.”

“I love you,” Sirius whispered, and he rolled over so he could kneel over Severus and stare into his endless black eyes. The look in Severus’s eyes left him breathless.

“I love you, too,” Severus responded slowly, tasting the words on his lips. He glanced away quickly and then looked back, and Sirius knew at that moment, he would do anything for him.

He leaned down and kissed Severus slowly and tenderly, his lips soft and insistent. Severus kissed back, bringing a hand up to grab the back of Sirius’s head. They kissed and made love on a bed of wildflowers in the soothing twilight dusk.

Chapter End Notes

> Prague has a very special place in my heart. I find it the most beautiful city in the world. America, too, but for other reasons.
>
> Two chapters remaining. Two more chapters with this story. I hope you enjoy.

Heartbroken

Chapter Notes

> The timing of this chapter differs from canon as I wanted to include a specific scene. Please forgive my mild canon divergences.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Severus opened his eyes to an insistent beeping and scowled. He rolled over to shrug off Sirius and glanced at the pebble that shined with a dim red light. He used a few seconds to collect himself, shutting his eyes against the darkness of Sirius's room.

The pebble operated as his makeshift alarm system to Hogwarts, which meant someone was calling him. Which meant, with a sinking feeling in his gut, that there was a problem. He desperately hoped some Slytherin had suffered a minor accident or that Poppy needed an immediate refill of potions for an injured student. Something relatively minor and easily handled so that he could quickly return to Sirius.

Sighing, he sat up and swung his legs off the bed. He rolled his shoulders to try to ease the tension out of his back. He grabbed the pebble to silence it, summoned his clothing, and quickly dressed, mindlessly buttoning up his dark robe. He glanced over at Sirius who lay sprawled out on the bed, fast asleep.

His eyes flickered behind his eyelids, but his face remained lax. He looked at peace, and Severus watched him closely, trying once again to memorize every detail of his face. He was a stunning man and made all the more handsome by his love.

Severus's hand reached the top of his robe, and he curled his lips downward. He shook the sleep out of his mind and carefully plastered his mask back on. A scowl now entrenched on his face, he turned to the quill and parchment he kept on his bed stand for his sudden departures. He scribbled out a quick note and looked back at Sirius, who had shifted onto his side. His mouth had parted slightly, and he breathed evenly.

Severus prepared to use the portkey, but a twist in his gut caused him to pause. A horrible sense of dread fell upon him, but he couldn't place the reason. He would be back before morning, and Sirius would still be here - as he always was. He had nothing to fear tonight.

Despite his logical assurances, he found himself leaning over the bed to press a gentle kiss on Sirius's forehead. The skin was soft and warm beneath his lips, and he lovingly traced his hand down Sirius's face and along his jaw.

He startled himself out of it and stood up rigidly. Before he could think twice, he grabbed the ring Albus had provided him last year and thought of Hogwarts. He once again found himself spinning through the cosmos, landing heavily in his dark room.

He smoothed himself out in the mirror, checking to make sure he stared passively back. Satisfied, he answered the door and was met with a grinning Draco Malfoy.

"Professor," Draco said excitedly and started to explain about Potter and Umbridge. Severus felt

the sense of dread acutely worsen. However, he kept it well hidden as he followed Draco to Umbridge's office, responding blandly to Draco's comments.

The scene that greeted him in Umbridge's office threatened to catalyze a pounding headache over the general irrationality and recklessness of Potter and his crew. Despite Albus no longer providing the reassurance of his protective oversight, they continue to run stupidly towards trouble. And while Severus spared no sympathy towards Umbridge, he practically wanted to yell at Potter to leave the woman alone and *stay out of trouble.*

However, in the grand scheme, it was of little consequence. The pimple would lose her mind and seek a way to punish the boy, but as long as he stayed at Hogwarts, he would be safe. The Dark Lord, despite everything, could not reach him here. He turned to leave, scowling that he had been disturbed over something like this.

"He's got Padfoot," Potter suddenly yelled, and Severus felt his heart freeze. "He's got Padfoot at the place where it's hidden." Molten panic washed over him, and he was glad he had turned away because he didn't think he had done all that well in hiding it. Then the logical part of his mind chirped in – an impossibility, he had been with Sirius mere minutes ago. The Dark Lord would have had no time to take him anywhere.

He wanted to turn back to Potter and explain it slowly and carefully so that it could get through his thick skull. Yet he felt Draco's and the other Slytherins gazes on his back. He knew he had to be very careful. If he appeared to help Potter, they would whisper back to their parents and the Dark Lord would know. No, that wouldn't do. He could not risk his position for something like this.

So, tamping down on the surge of panic, he turned back. He stared intently at Potter willing him to have some sense. "I have no idea," he said coldly. "Potter, when I want nonsense shouted at me I shall give you a Babbling Beverage. And Crabbe, loosen your hold a little if Longbottom suffocates it will mean a lot of tedious paperwork, and I am afraid I shall have to mention it on your reference if ever you apply for a job."

He noted with relief that Crabbe loosened his grip, but the look in Potter's eyes did nothing to reassure him. However, there was nothing more he could do without risking his position in front of Draco. No, he would need to alert the Order and make sure Albus knew in case anything more came of it.

He turned and left quickly, fighting the urge to run. He desperately wanted to see Sirius again, but he had to remain focused. His priority was reaching Albus.

He took out the Order's phoenix token from his pocket and held it his mouth as relayed the events of the past few minutes. It would then alarm the other Order members and inform them of the message. From there, he would trust them to respond appropriately, even though he possessed little faith in their abilities.

With that done, he focused again on Albus. Albus had remained hidden, but he had left instructions on how to contact him for a select few, Severus included. He was grateful now for his prioritization as there was no time to waste.

He rushed up to the Astronomy Tower. The night yawned before him, a scintillating canvas laid bare. He gripped his wand and whispered the spell, casting upwards.

He tilted his head as he saw a few stars pop into existence. Their position acted as a call for help and would last until morning. In the morning, they would transform into a distinct pattern of clouds and gradually fade throughout the day.

Albus had assured him that he would always keep watch, and he trusted that he would. He wondered if he should try to meet him and explain. His mind ran through the option, but he decided against it. Albus would hear it from the Order; after seeing Severus's call for help, he would reach out to the others before seeking him.

Severus sucked in his cheeks and thought. The Order knew. Albus knew. Sirius, he prayed, would stay safe. Potter…

He took off. He retraced his steps to Umbridge's office and pressed his ear against the door. The room was silent; he opened it to prove their absence. Muttering out a curse, he turned and thought through where Potter would have fled too.

He couldn't have left Hogwarts, Severus didn't think, unless Umbridge had taken them somewhere. Could Potter have gotten Umbridge to take him to the Ministry? It was unlikely, but Granger was clever and could have figured something out.

He gripped the doorframe. He could only search Hogwarts and quite likely, he would find Potter in some godforsaken corner of it. He would start at the Gryffindor quarters and then the grounds and work from there.

He left the room again and began to search. He walked with quick determination and grew increasingly panicked when his search yielded nothing. Either Potter had left Hogwarts, which he prayed desperately against, or he had disappeared into the Forbidden Forest, far from ideal but acceptable, or he had done everyone a favor and gone back to bed.

His gut told him Potter had left, and he ran a hand over his face. The Dark Lord hadn't been talking to him lately, he hadn't hinted towards anything, but Bellatrix had seemed especially alert lately. And Lucius had looked at him in a way that reeked of superiority. They may not have trusted him over this given his proximity to Albus. The dread grew pungent.

He leaned against a tree trunk. Bile burned his throat as he fought down his panic. There was nothing he could do.

He wanted Sirius.

With a jerky movement, he grabbed at the portkey to Sirius's room and felt the familiar yank in his stomach. When he landed, a quick glance proved the room empty. Haphazardly thrown blankets indicated that Sirius had risen in haste, and Severus had to lean against his chair to stop from falling over.

The dread tasted steely in his mouth, and with fractured thoughts, he decided he wanted some tea. He moved gingerly downstairs. He stood at the door to the kitchen and achingly wished that opening the door would reveal a grim Sirius, concerned about his godson but safe.

The empty room felt like a laceration across his chest. He made tea with trembling hands. He held the tea closely to his chest, the hot cup nearly burning his hands. He stood aimlessly and then sat down heavily.

He stared at a whorl in the wooden table, eyes unable to unlatch from it. He gripped the tea tightly but couldn't bring himself to drink. Fear inflated inside him until he could feel nothing else. Dread pressed against him like demanding hands. Severus fought the urge to curl up and cry.

He couldn't. He couldn't show weakness. Instead, he sat and waited.

He had no sense of time, no sense of anything besides terror over the overwhelming unknowns.

Looking back, he almost wished he could have stayed like that. Even sick with terror, he still possessed a thimble of hope. Hope that Sirius would walk through the door, tired but alive and with eyes that searched only for Severus's.

His hope fluttered against the fear and gave him enough space to breathe.

The abrupt arrival of a few of the Order's members jolted him out of his stupor. When he saw Remus's eyes, the hope died and took him along with it.

Sirius Black never walked through that door, but Severus practically ran out of it, pushing past the battle-worn wizards. He ignored them, kept his head down, and when he made it outside, he apparated away mindlessly.

He didn't land near Spinner's End this time but rather a forest. It took him a moment to realize it was some crevice of the Forbidden Forest, but it didn't matter.

He started running, desperately needing to move as if doing so would allow him to escape the tsunami of agony that had begun to crest over him. He ran until he tripped. His hands landed in the soft dirt, rocks scraping his palms. He curled his fingers into it and heaved.

His eyes burned, but the tears wouldn't come. He processed he was in shock, that something truly terrible had happened, but he couldn't-he couldn't-.

A moment later, he started to scream. The scream ripped open his throat, drove all the air from his lungs, but wouldn't stop, would never stop because the pain wouldn't either.

He screamed until his voice gave out. He found he still couldn't cry, so he curled up in himself. He yanked at his hair, but the pain was laughable in the face of loss.

The agony hit him in waves, every crest driving him further and further. He couldn't fight it, he couldn't fight it-

A dry sob tore at his throat. His mind turned on him, a mantra of despair repeating ceaselessly. The agony demanded his unrelenting attention and crashed down on him, drowning him in the process.

He had lost Sirius like he had lost Lily.

He had lost Sirius like he had lost Lily.

He had lost—*everything.*

He practically sobbed with gratitude when the world started to fade into black.

Chapter End Notes

The canon world is not kind.

It wasn't an easy decision for me to make by any means, but I knew from the beginning that this is the ending I wanted to work towards. The canon of it is so heartbreakingly sad that I wanted to leave it mostly intact. Still painful, of course, for our two beautiful lovers.

The next chapter will act as a sort of epilogue. I highly suggest reading it.

Thank you again. I would never have imagined myself ever getting this far, and I am so grateful for this story and all my wonderful readers (even if you may hurt me at this current moment :)

After

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Severus Snape awoke with a start. He immediately reached for his throat and gasped in surprise when he felt smooth skin where he had expected a deep, torn gash. He swallowed, and the action didn't inspire pain. No, he felt…alright.

He blinked hard, focusing his gaze. He stared up at a dim, gray sky, the sun lost behind some foggy mist. He lay against what felt like grass. He sat up slowly. His eyes flickered over the scene before him, and he realized with a start that he had found himself in his clearing. The pond and trees and everything looked the same, except for the fact that something had leeched them of color and left them gray and lifeless.

He hadn't returned to his clearing, not since, not since—. He scanned the clearing looking for something out of place. Besides the oppressive grayness, he could sense nothing.

He glanced down at himself and realized he was naked. He realized, frightened, that his scars lay visible. However, instead of festering and angry, the lines and marks had softened. They looked like a fractured spider web, smooth and faded. He ran a hand over his skin, brow crumpling as he realized some had disappeared entirely.

He suddenly thought of clothes; he couldn't bear his nakedness not since, not since—. To his surprise, he found himself instantly clothed in his familiar black robes. They appeared within the space of a breath and comforted him in their familiarity.

He glanced around again, eyes wary, and thought back over the last few minutes. The Shrieking Shack, the Dark Lord, Nagini, the pain, Potter, Lily, and—.

His death.

After thirty-nine years of his existence, he had died. By a snake no less, he thought with bitter irony. And his afterlife happened to look like the clearing he had sought refuge in so many times before.

He blinked and processed the thought. He had expected to have plunged into the literary pits of hell. He had expected – he didn't know what he had expected, but it wasn't this.

The clearing as far as he could tell was empty, and he wondered if he had landed in purgatory. An eternity spent alone he tried to imagine, but there was no sense to it. He wondered about all the others he had lost if they were trapped somewhere like this. Or, more likely, their lives had been marked as good, and they had made it into whatever heaven happened to await.

Bitter loneliness rose up in him. He would give anything to see Sirius again, to apologize to Lily, to speak with Albus. He would have even felt justified in some hellish torture. To be alone, without any indication of punishment or reward, tore at him, and he pressed his lips hard together.

Perhaps that was his punishment. Loneliness.

He nearly shouted in relief when he heard a rustle behind him. He twisted around to see—.

"Potter?" he asked, staring at him in confusion. James Potter smiled back, nervously bringing a

hand up to the back of his head.

“Hey,” he greeted. He strode across the clearing to sit next to Severus. Severus stared at him wide-eyed, questions thrumming in his head. He glanced back in the direction Potter had emerged, a spluttering of hope for Sirius or Lily or Albus, but no one else walked through.

He turned his attention back to Potter. He looked exactly the same as when Severus had found him dead on the staircase. No older than twenty-one years old, and Severus felt ancient.

“Potter,” he began slowly, keeping his voice low to mask the hints of panic. “Is this-?”

“The afterlife? Yes,” Potter said. He leaned back on his hands and stared over the pond. “You died, Sn-is it alright if I call you Severus?”

Severus stared at him. It took a long beat before he nodded. James Potter smiled back at him.

“Alright, Severus, please call me James,” he continued. He paused. “You died.”

“I know,” he whispered hoarsely, and he felt the fangs sink into his neck again. James winced.

“Yeah, you, it looked pretty brutal,” he said slowly and then seemed to shake himself out of it. “Um, so yes, you died. And this is your resting point,” he said, gesturing out towards the pond. “Where you get to decide what you want to do.”

“What I want to do?” Severus asked, suppressing the tremor in his voice. James nodded.

“You can’t stay here,” he explained. “The leaves change quickly, and this place will fade. You can either go back-”

“Like a ghost?” Severus asked quietly. James nodded again. He had nothing to go back too; death had taken everything from him. “Or?”

“Or you come with me. To the next part. I can’t tell you what that will be for you,” James continued when he noticed Severus’s alarm. “But-that’s the choice. Return as a ghost or continue onwards.”

“Does everyone get this choice?” Severus asked, desperately needing time to think.

“I don’t know. I’m only supposed to offer it to you.”

Severus nodded jerkily. “So you’re my guide?”

James thought for a moment. “Yes, I suppose so.”

“Were you Sirius’s?” he asked in barely a whisper. The words cut strings of agony across his chest, and he shut his eyes at the familiar welling of grief. James stared at him soberly.

“No, I wasn’t,” he responded. Severus felt disappointment burn behind his eyes.

“Is he-?” he asked, the words yanked from his chest.

“I can’t speak of it, Severus.”

Severus kept himself very still. Then,” he said slowly, the options running through his mind. He would not return as a ghost. His life, after losing so much, was not one he would want to continue. Which left the second option- to continue onward. “I’ll go with you,” he said, and James stared at

him, expression unreadable. Fear caused him to grip tightly at the gray grass; he imagined the ground falling away.

Choosing to go with James held no guarantee that he would see Lily or Sirius or Albus again. Quite likely, he would be designated to an area of the afterlife reserved for people who had committed horrible crimes. He would brush elbows with the likes of his father, not with people like Lily Evans.

It was entirely likely his choice to go with Potter would doom him.

And it was even more likely that he would never get to say a final goodbye to the people he loved. The thought made him want to cry, but he hadn't cried, hadn't been able to since, since--.

That meant James Potter may be his last chance to communicate with them. For James Potter would not have been condemned to misery. No, he had likely found himself in an afterlife with Lily and Sirius. The one Severus could hope for but would never reach.

"Before-," he started, fingers shredding the grass. James glanced over at him, and Severus was struck by how much his son resembled him. The son he had sent to his death.

"Yes?" James asked softly.

Severus steadied himself and stared hard at a point in the ground. This would be it, he thought, his only way to say his goodbyes to Lily and Sirius and Albus.

"Could you-?" he asked hesitantly. James tilted his head, watching him closely. Severus shut his eyes and composed his thoughts. "I'm not entirely sure that people like me reach the parts of the afterlife where people like Lily reside. As such, given there is no guarantee of me…of me seeing them ever again and given that I have reason to believe that you would, I wanted to ask if you could-," he broke off, the firmness of his voice wavering. "If you could relay a message to them on my behalf."

James didn't speak, but his gaze never left Severus's face. Severus looked back down to the ground, ignoring the agony wedged in his chest. He didn't know whether James's silence expressed agreement or not, but it was his only chance. He hoped James found it in his heart to do so.

He cleared his throat. "For Lily," he began, his voice breaking. He paused, steadied himself, and continued. "For Lily, can you tell her thank you? That I would have been a far worse person without her. That she showed me kindness and happiness in a way I had never thought possible. She was my, I suppose…guiding light, one that helped me find a way to escape some of the darkness. And tell her that she…that I'm sorry for everything I did to hurt her. But that I hope she's happy with you and that she should be proud of her son. For who he became," Severus broke off and gripped his knees. He didn't look for James's reaction. He shut his eyes and persisted.

"For Albus," he choked on the name. "Tell him I tried. I tried as hard as I could. And I'm sorry it wasn't enough. And that-that I saw him as the…best person I've ever known. And that I'm sorry for having been the one who-," he couldn't speak the words. He paused for a long time, the torment warping his senses.

"For Si-Sirius," he said, putting all his strength into speaking his name. "For him, that I, that he was the best thing that ever happened to me. That I-I loved him. That I should have been there," he broke off, breathing heavily. "Tell him that he deserves to be happy. With you and Lily and whoever else. That I wish I could be there for him, but I, I-." A dry sob cut him off, and he pressed

his forehead into his knees. This was no use; the words laughable in the face of the pain in his chest.

James shifted beside him. “Doubt that the stars are fire,” he murmured. “Doubt that the sun doth move his aides. Doubt truth to be a liar, but never doubt I love.”

Severus startled and glanced up at him, eyes widening slightly. James looked back at him with fathomless eyes.

“Shakespeare,” James explained quietly. Severus pressed his hand hard against his mouth.

"Thank you,” he whispered, and James nodded, glancing down. He ran his hands down his shirt, seeming to collect himself.

“Anything else?” he asked quietly. Severus stared back across the pond.

“Yes,” he said suddenly. “Yes, there was a child. Henry.” The words came out insistent and urgent. He stared pleadingly at James. “I had to-Sirius will know. Can you check on him? To make sure he’s okay? I don’t know if he has anyone, but-.” He bit his lip and fell quiet. James looked at him, and his expression seemed to convey understanding.

“Okay,” he replied and stood up. “Are you ready?”

Severus felt a nail of fear drive deep into him. He didn’t think he could move. He didn’t want to know what would happen next. In his small clearing - at least he wasn’t in physical pain.

His mind flashed towards his father waiting for him, a cruel smile gracing his face. Terror slammed into him.

But it didn’t matter, he thought. He had sinned, and his punishment would follow as such. And if that frightened him, so what? He deserved it, truly, for every terrible thing he had done.

Resigned, he slowly stood up. He avoided James’s eyes, unable to face that boy who had taken so much from him. Unable to admit that he would again never have what Potter did. So it was and so it would be.

He faltered at the boundary of the clearing. James glanced back at him concerned.

“It’ll be alright” he comforted. Severus bit down on the fear and let an unsteady courage fill him. He forced a step forward and another. The branches scraped against him, tearing hard against his robes, but he pushed onwards, refusing to stop, refusing to allow another defeat.

He would end his last few minutes of relative freedom with strength. And then he would face whatever the afterlife held for him with that same strength. And he would continue to do so as long as he could for that what was he had done in life.

The forest ended suddenly. He blinked, blinded by the sudden, almost violent sunlight. Color washed through his vision, and he stopped, tensing in fear.

When his eyes adjusted to the sudden influx of light, he glanced around warily, expecting the worst. What he saw was a pleasant row of houses. A line of flowering trees that swelled with pink flowers. A stone path that connected each house. And in one window a flash of red hair and a figure that he felt in his gut was Sirius.

And James Potter, standing beside him with a beaming smile on his face. Severus stared at him and

startled when James pulled him into a hug.

James stood back, resting his hand on Severus's shoulder. The smile never left his face, and Severus watched him, frightened to let the hope manifest into something more.

Yet, it seemed like hell did not await him. It seemed like he had reached the place he had always yearned for but never thought he deserved.

He stared at James looking for some confirmation. The look in James's eyes quelled his doubts.

"How about you tell them yourself?" James said, the smile threatening to split his face. Severus stared at him in incomprehension for a moment. The words filtered through slowly, but as they did, he turned back to that one house.

He noted with a cry that rang out from his soul that the figures had moved from the window to the doorstep. And he could see the smiles that rested on the faces of Albus and Lily and Sirius.

He pressed his hand against his mouth as he tried and failed to stop himself from crying.

He stood there, overwhelmed, but then James pushed him lightly forward. He found himself running, cloak flopping ungainly behind him.

Sirius took off in a run also, and then he was there, he was there! When they finally embraced underneath the canopy of flowers, Severus held on so tightly that his fingers ached. Sirius pulled back and looked at him in a way that made everything finally, after *everything,* feel alright in the world.

And then they kissed, and Severus decided that while life had never treated him kindly, his afterlife would be everything he deserved and more.

FIN.

Chapter End Notes

Thus, I conclude this story.

It's hard to believe that this journey took three years. It's hard to believe that my first hesitant chapters led to this. It's hard to believe that I came to this ending and then the beginning of many other stories.

The story cemented my love for writing, inspired me to take these two down other paths and into other worlds. My writing is now a distinct point of pride for me - regardless of the quality, the sheer commitment and joy I've gained from writing these two falling in love has significantly marked my life. I had never thought of myself as a writer (always and eternally a reader) but now I have disproved that initial assumption and discovered something in myself that I love.

This story catalyzed that for me. It led me to understand words and characters and plots on a level I hadn't before. It led me to write more and more until I can't imagine stopping. This story caused me to fall in love - which at the end of the day, is all I could have asked for.

I hope sincerely that you enjoyed this work. I admit there are plot threads I let fall or avenues that deserved further exploration, but I started this as a hesitant writer unsure of the plot and ended it far more confident. I may - one day - revisit this work and this little universe. But until then, I hope this leaves you happy, if not a little sad. Both for me, drawing to a conclusion, and for these beloved characters, finding their happiness not in life but in death.

As always, I thank you from the bottom of my heart. For all my readers, all my wonderful dutiful commenters - I thankyou. I thank you a thousands times over wish you absolute best.

Sincerely,
TowardstheStars

Works inspired by this one

[ART] The Headaches by bananagege

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!